SEPT.

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

15¢

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

BLISS LOMAX'S LATEST BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

RUSTY GUNS

Featuring Rainbow and Grumpy

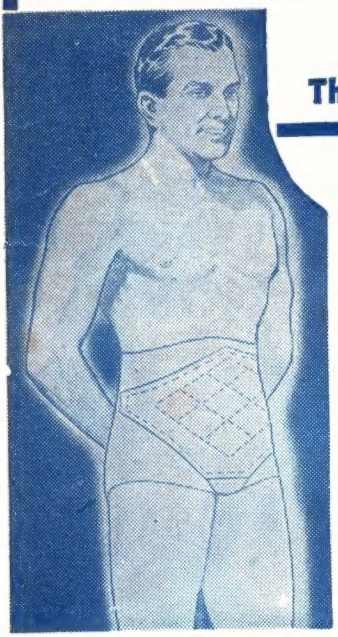
BUY ONE OF THESE TODAY!

THOUSANDS of MEN NOW

Appear SLIMMER — *Feel* BETTER — *Look* YOUNGER

with Commander

The Amazing NEW Abdominal Supporter



Yes, instantly you, too, can begin to feel ALIVE . . . ON TOP OF THE WORLD by joining the Parade of Men who are marching up the highway of happier living with the COMMANDER, the amazing new Men's abdominal supporter.

GET "IN SHAPE" INSTANTLY AND ENJOY A HAPPY STREAMLINED APPEARANCE
The COMMANDER presents the exclusively designed "INTERLOCKING HANDS" principle for extra double support where you need it most. It flattens the burdensome sagging "corporation" and restores to the body the zestful invigorating feeling that comes with firm, sure "bay window" control. Order this new belt today and begin enjoying the pleasure of feeling "in shape" at once.

BREATHE EASIER—TAKE WEIGHT OFF TIRED FEET
The helpful uplifting EXTRA SUPPORTING power of the COMMANDER firmly supports abdominal sag. The instant you pull on the belt you breathe easier . . . your wind is longer . . . you feel better!

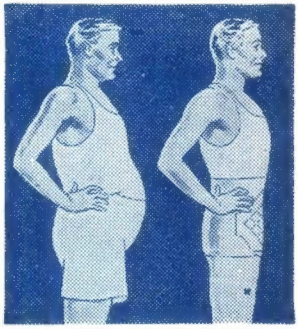
YOUR BACK IS BRACED—YOUR CLOTHES FIT BETTER—YOU APPEAR TALLER
The COMMANDER braces your figure, your posture becomes erect . . . you look and feel slimmer . . . your clothes fit you better. Your friends will notice the improvement immediately.

COMMANDER IS NEW AND MODERN!
The absence of gouging steel ribs, dangling buckles and bothersome laces will prove a joy. COMMANDER has a real man's jock type pouch, with front opening. IT GIVES GENUINE MALE PROTECTION. Try this amazing new belt with full confidence . . . and at our risk. SEND FOR IT NOW!

MAKE THIS TEST WITH YOUR OWN HANDS AND FEEL WHAT WE MEAN

*THE SECRET OF THE "INTERLOCKING HANDS"

Only COMMANDER contains this NEW principle. A porous non-stretch material is built into the Special stretch body of the COMMANDER. STRETCHES 10 to 14 INCHES HIGH...in the outline of two interlocking hands for EXTRA DOUBLE SUPPORT where you need it most. **NO BUCKLES, LACES OR STRAPS.**



Commander Wearers all over America Say—

"I am sure you will be pleased to know that it is by far the best and most practical supporter I have ever had. I have been pleased to show it to several of my friends and they are likewise impressed with it. You shall probably hear from some of them in the future."
Dr. A. M. S.
Standish, Mich.

"Enclosed find order for another belt. I wouldn't be without this supporter for ten times what it costs."
Dr. G. C. S.
St. Charles, Ill.

"Received the Commander about a week ago. To say that I am well pleased with it would be putting it mildly—I can see that it fills a long felt want, giving the needed support and a most comfortable feeling. I never miss putting it on the first thing in the morning. Enclosed is my check for another."
J. C. McG.
St. Paul, Minn.

"I recommend the Commander for what it is made for. It sure has been a great help to me. I want to thank you for what it has done. I might add it has helped me more than anything I have ever tried."
P. N.
Fort Knox, Ky.

Above are just a few of the many unsolicited testimonials for the Commander that we receive regularly. Originals of these and others are on file.

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Send me the "COMMANDER" for ten days Free Trial. I will pay postman the special price of $2.98 plus postage. If not satisfied after wearing it ten days I may return it and the purchase price will be promptly refunded.

My waist measure..... My height is.....
(Send string the size of waist if measuring tape is not available.)

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DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 11 ★ ★ September, 1944 ★ ★ Number 2

COMPLETE NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

RUSTY GUNS.....**By Bliss Lomax** **10**

Starring Rainbow Ripley and Grumpy Gibbs, Range Detectives

There was no lack of suspects when cattle-king Jennifer was murdered, but Rainbow and Grumpy found themselves up against their toughest case yet, because all the leads cancelled out. Then came the telegram from Seng Mei-lang which opened up a deadly trail to the killer's one mistake—a blunder which would force him to strike again and again until all who stumbled upon the secret had been silenced forever!

SHORT STORIES

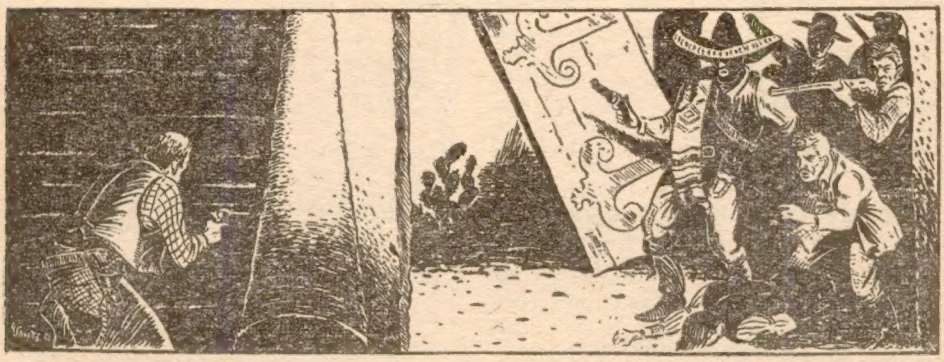
STORY BOOK HERO.....**By Cordwell Staples** **91**

In a way it was too bad that Clint Abbott had brought in the dangerous Red Dorgan single-handed. Because the young deputy was getting top-heavy from a swelled head!

SATAN STAMPEDES THE LAZY B.....**By Charles D. Richardson Jr.** **104**

When a rustler's too smart, he can lift himself by his bootstraps—straight into Boothill!

Cover by Leslie Ross *Robert W. Lowndes, Editor*



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You Build These and Many Other Radio Circuits with Kits I Supply

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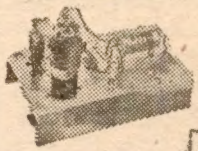
(above) you build early in Course. Vacuum tube multimeter, measures A.C., D.C., R.F. volts, D.C. currents, resistance, receiver output.

SUPER-HETERODYNE CIRCUIT

(above) Preselector, oscillator - mixer-first detector, i.f. stage, diode - detector - a.v.c. stage, audio stage. Brings in local and distant stations.



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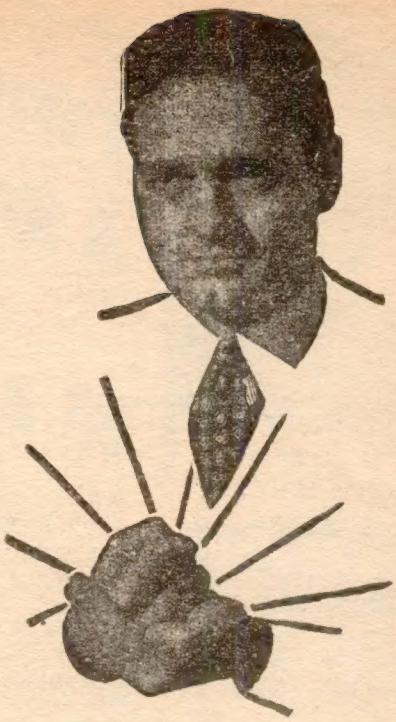

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I'm going to be an Accountant —and make REAL money"

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J. G. O'BRIEN Atlas Champion Cup Winner This is an ordinary snapshot of one of Charles Atlas' California pupils.

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My method—**"Dynamic Tension"**—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of **"Dynamic Tension"** almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

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I want the proof that your system of **"Dynamic Tension"** will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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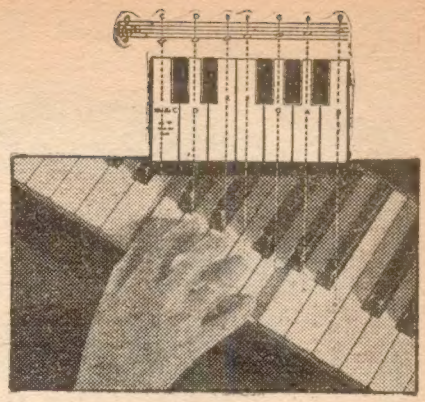

HOW ROMANCE STARTED First it was, "I love to hear you play"; then, "I love you." Many have found music the key to popularity, friendships and romance. The girl who plays some musical instrument is always in demand, never lonesome and neglected. Make this charming accomplishment yours!

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"The lessons are so simple," writes* S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo., "that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course."

Easy Method Starts Thousands Playing—Free Offer Shows How

**Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.*

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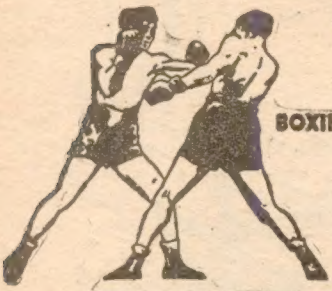

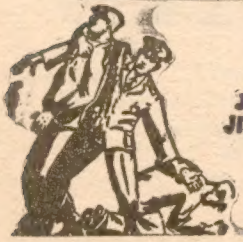

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In every dynamite-packed page of these sensational book form instructions, experts teach you through pictures and stories our new method. How you can K.O. your enemy with one clean scientific wallop! How to master him with punishing, bruising, wrestling holds! How to use his strength to destroy himself through deadly bone-crushing Jiu-Jitsu.

Now forget the word fear! Never again cringe or shy away from a scrap. Imagine the wonderful feeling of confidence that will come when you know that you're nobody's slave, and that nobody can push you around. Think of the respect that others will have for you, and the safety they'll feel being with you, when they find out what a rough, tough, scrapping, deadly-efficient hellion you can be.

You will learn quickly and easily through our amazing new "slow-motion picture" method. You will learn every stance, every hold, every grip as portrayed by our experts. It's just like getting personal instruction in the privacy of your own home. And what's more, you don't pay the price of personal instruction. The experts who prepared these instructions want every red-blooded American to know how to defend himself. They wanted to make a "big man" of every small one. So the price of these books was made so low that everyone could afford to own them. Yes, you can't afford to be without them.

We want you to have all three books. We want you to be able to defend yourself against any attacker, no matter how he fights. Therefore, if you buy any two books, we will give you the third book absolutely FREE.

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The intruder jumped onto the waiting horse as Grumpy approached.

RUSTY GUNS

Brand New Book-Length Novel

FEATURING "RAINBOW" AND "GRUMPY"

By Bliss Lomax

(Author of "Horsethief Creek," "Saddle Hawks" etc.)

The family of Henry J. Jennifer, cantankerous cattle-king, was split into bitter factions, any one of which might have arranged his murder. And there were plenty of outsiders who had reason to kill the old man. But Rainbow Ripley and Grumpy Gibbs, ace range detectives, found themselves up against a blank wall, regardless of the direction in which they turned!

CHAPTER I

Death for a Cattle-King

"MR. RIPLEY, Mr. Conroy will see you and Mr. Gibbs in just a minute," the attractive-looking young secretary to the president of the firm told the famous pair when she had shown them to a private reception room. She had a breath-taking smile for Ripley.

"Thank you," the tall man murmured. His glance followed her as she left. "I'd much prefer seeing Conroy's secretary than seeing Conroy," he murmured. His pint-size partner emitted a characteristic snort of disgust.

"It's like crackin' a safe to git into see this man. All these information gals, reception clerks and secretaries!"

"And each one prettier than the other." Rip grinned. "Or are you getting so old you don't notice such things anymore?"

The little man gave him a withering glance and picked up a magazine. "I must have had more sense when I was thirty than you've got," he growled. "It couldn't have been that every purty face I saw set me wingin' like it does you. When you git as old as I be, I hope you'll show some signs of sanity and discrimination."

Ripley's gray eyes wrinkled in an amused smile. He was used to the other's scolding. In fact, the degree of its vehemence had become the barometer by which he kept track of the little man's health. When it was as sharp as this, he concluded that all was well.

The little one, with his hard-bitten face and rocky jaw, was old enough to have been his father, but they had been partners so long and had come to have such confidence in each other that an understanding had sprung up between them that seldom took account of the difference in their ages. The success they had achieved in their dangerous profession had won them a formidable reputation without changing them in the slightest, and as they sat cooling their heels in Dan Conroy's reception room there was little about them to suggest that they were the well-known range detectives Rainbow Ripley and Grumpy Gibbs.

Though they had been conducting an investigation for the Conroy and McCann Construction Company for ten weeks, this was only the second time they had been in the firm's general offices in Denver. Their only reason for being there this morning was to pick up a check for the services they had rendered.

The minutes dragged on, and a quarter of an hour passed before Conroy's secretary reappeared in the door and conducted them into his office. He shook hands with them and apologized for keeping them waiting.

"This must be a mistake," Rainbow said, glancing at the check he'd been handed. "It calls for a thousand dollars more than the figure we set."

"It's not a mistake," Conroy assured him. "You've done a good job, and this is our way of showing we appreciate it. I'm sorry we didn't call you in the minute we suspected someone was interested in seeing that we didn't complete the Fox Lake job on time. We could have lost our shirt up there."

RIPLEY thanked him for his generosity. "We had a little luck in cracking this case," he said modestly. "Soursby is a shrewd crook; he had himself covered in every direction but one. We were fortunate enough to have the right hunch about it."

"Yes, and you were also fortunate enough to kill that thug Steve Bruneau before he blew the two of you and the foundation of our dam across the Continental Divide," Conroy declared dryly. He shook his head. "No, Ripley, luck isn't the answer; the two of you did an excellent job, and I can thank your friend Tom Street and the Rocky Mountain Short Line for putting me in touch with you. When Tom suggested that we call you in, I don't mind admitting I was a little skeptical until he told me how you had handled the robbery

of their Silk Express a couple years ago. His referring to you as a pair of range detectives was what fooled me; I knew our trouble wasn't rustlers. Why do you boys still call yourselves range detectives? I understand you haven't handled a rustling case in years."

"That's the way we started out," Grumpy answered. "The name kinda sticks to us. If we don't take rustlin' jobs anymore it's only because we seem to find bigger fish to fry. But we've worked for most of the stock associations. Hardly a big owner between here and the Coast that we ain't acquainted with."

"I suppose you knew Henry Jennifer, the cattle-king," Conroy observed, as he walked to the door with them.

"Yeh, well!" the little man declared. "Rip used to ride for him once, up in Oregon. We heard old Slick-ear got married ag'in about a year ago. That must be three times for him."

"It'll certainly be the last time," said Conroy. "Jennifer's been murdered."

Rainbow's head went up. "Where did you hear that?"

"Why, it's spread all over the front page of the News this morning. Seems that the housekeeper found the body when she came downstairs this morning. I didn't read it all, but I gathered that he had been killed during the night by someone who'd got into the living room of that big show-place of a house he built for his new wife. El Portal, I believe they call it."

"That's on the home ranch at Star City, Nevada," Rainbow recalled. "I'll have to get a paper."

"Here's one," Conroy said. "Take it along if you like."

Rip thanked him, and after a word or two more, they shook hands and said good-bye.

"Henry J. Jennifer murdered!" Grumpy muttered, as they waited for the elevator. "If it had happened twenty years ago it wouldn't have surprised me; I've heard a hundred men—most of them cowpunchers—swear they'd kill him some day. That old penny-pinchin', range grabber had a chunk of cast iron for a heart! It's no wonder he made a million dollars; he certainly never spent a nickel on his men. I remember when Dutch Kornwine used to drive into McDermitt for supplies in the dead of winter—twenty below and seventy miles to go—and that old highbinder wouldn't give him two bits so he could git himself a hot breakfast when he got there."

"Mr. Jennifer wasn't a bad boss," Rainbow objected; "he didn't drive his men any harder than he drove himself. I've heard him called a ruthless range hog, and a lot worse, but the fact remains that it was the Jennifer, Gordon Cattle Company that opened up the country north and south of the Oregon-Nevada line and made it prosperous. I don't suppose the old man's death will have any effect on the business; his sons have been running it for the last five years."

THEY were staying at the Brown Palace. The hotel was just a step around the corner. They found the usual crowd of mining men gathered in the barroom. So many deals were consummated there that it had given rise to the exaggerated statement that more business was transacted in the Brown Palace bar than on the Denver stock exchange. They managed to find an empty table against the wall. They caught a waiter's eye and ordered a drink.

"Git out that paper and let's see what it says," Grumpy said. "Strange that he was killed in his own house and the crime wasn't discovered till the next mornin'."

Rainbow began reading the article aloud, only to discover that it was largely biographical. There was a highly-colored description of El Portal, the thirty-room mansion the old cowman had built for his young bride. Of the crime itself, there was little beyond what Conroy had told them. Henry Jennifer had been struck down by what Sheriff Baker described as a "blunt instrument." He called it a vengeance slaying and was quoted as saying that he had taken

charge of the case and expected to make an arrest in the very near future.

"Newspaper twaddle!" Grumpy exclaimed contemptuously. "If this man Baker really said anything of the sort, you can lay yore money on it that he ain't got a thing up his sleeve. When a sheriff begins yappin' about future arrests, he's jest sparrin' for time."

Rainbow nodded. "That's usually the case. Mr. Jennifer was seventy; that's pretty old to figure in a vengeance slaying. I don't know anything about the crime, but if it were put up to me, I'd have to have something definite before I'd take that slant." He discarded the paper. "I wish we were in Reno, Grump, so we could follow this case. It would be an interesting way to kill a few days."

"We'll follow it in the newspapers," was the little man's disinterested advice. "We ain't got no business in Reno. When I bought the tickets to Black Forks this mornin' I checked our saddles and ridin' gear. The thing to do now is to wire the judge we'll be showin' up tomorrow afternoon on the Pacific Limited. We'll be home in time to go over to Green River and take in the rodeo."

"Yeh," Rip agreed reluctantly. "That seems to make sense. I'll get this thing out of my mind. I wonder how much the new Mrs. Jennifer knows about the murder," he added speculatively as he waited for the waiter to bring the check.

"Good Josephine, are you goin' to go on about this all mornin'?" Grumpy snapped. "I don't know who murdered that old goat, and I don't care. Nobody's payin' us to worry about it. I'm goin' down the street and git my specs repaired while I'm here. You amuse yoreself for an hour or two; I'll be back for lunch."

Rainbow spent half an hour in the writing room, catching up on his correspondence. He was crossing the hotel lobby when he ran into Milo Gosline, the Reno banker. Gosline had read about the tragedy at El Portal. He had been acquainted with Henry Jennifer for a quarter of a century.

RIP had no difficulty in drawing him out about the third Mrs. Jennifer. There were details concerning Jennifer's sons that he found equally interesting.

Rainbow said nothing to Grumpy of his chance meeting with Gosline until they were rolling westward through Wyoming the following morning. A Salt Lake City newspaper had come aboard the train at Rawlins. It carried a picture of Rebecca Jennifer. The caption beneath it said she had been born Rebecca Thorn, the daughter of a Captain Richard Thorn, of San Francisco, and that her first husband had been Carter Ames, the sugar refiner. He had died, and she had married Jim Kelland, the well-known mining magnate. Following their divorce, she had married Henry J. Jennifer.

The partners were in the dining car. Rip handed the paper across the table to Grumpy.

"She's always married money," he observed. "How old would you say she is?"

The little man put on his gold-rimmed spectacles and studied the picture critically.

"Hunh! Good-looker," he declared. Rebecca Jennifer had a strong, purposeful face. Even this crude newspaper likeness, with all its unflattering imperfections, explained why men found her so attractive." I reckon she's in her early thirties. It's a cinch she married Henry Jennifer for his money; a woman as young as that don't hook up with an old fool of seventy for any other reason. . . . Here, take your paper! My breakfast is gittin' cold! Suppose you got it all figgered out that she had him done away with."

"No, not at all," Rip said lightly. "She looks too intelligent to me not to have planned it better, if she had wanted to get rid of him. It would have been an easy matter for her to have arranged to be in San Francisco and put herself beyond suspicion. I ran into Milo Gosline in the hotel yesterday noon and had a long talk

with him. He told me three or four things I didn't know."

"Wal?" Grumpy queried perfunctorily.

"Bill and Ted Jennifer never forgave their father for marrying this woman. Milo told me they refused to set foot in this place El Portal. And there's a half-brother, Martin Jennifer, who's had a grudge against all of them for years."

"For years?" the little one repeated testily. "You mean ever since Henry Jennifer walked out on that kid and his mother! I remember her—a hard-workin' woman who wasn't fancy enough for him when he got into the chips! I'm willin' to give the devil his due, but I can tell you that old pirate had a lot to answer for....Go on with your breakfast! The way you keep bringin' this up you'd think we'd been called in to take charge of the case!"

Rainbow smiled. "Stranger things have happened. I know somebody will be called in if the sheriff and district attorney's office find they're up against a stone wall; Henry Jennifer was too big a man for his murder to go unsolved. Milo asked me point blank if we'd be available."

Grumpy straightened up. "What did you tell him?"

"That any proposition to interest us would have to come from the county or state authorities and give us a free hand."

"Then we can forget it," the pint-size man predicted confidently. "And that'll be okay with me; I know it'll save us a lot of headaches."

Rainbow gave him a puzzled glance. "What do you mean?"

"Why, you know as well as I do with a set-up like this case offers—publicity and lots of public interest—that some two-bit official will use it as a political step-ladder. We'd find ourselves takin' orders from him and playin' it his way, or we'd be out."

THE tall man nodded thoughtfully. "That's funny, your taking that slant. You know, I believe that's exactly what Milo Gosline's afraid will happen and why he seemed to be so anxious to have us called in; he knows we wouldn't stand for any pushing around. Milo wasn't only Mr. Jennifer's banker; the old man named him as executor of his estate. So he's interested in what happens. It won't surprise me if we hear from Reno in the next week or two."

"If we do, it'll be okay with me," Grumpy declared without enthusiasm. "In the meantime, I ain't goin' to lose no sleep over it."

Back in the observation, after breakfast, they encountered an old acquaintance, a Wind River stockman, and they whiled away the rest of the morning in pleasant reminiscence. Wamsutter Red Desert—they were familiar with every mile and signpost of this country. At noon, they were in Rock Springs. The short run to Green River and on to Black Forks didn't take long. When they stepped down on the platform, they were surprised to see Judge Carver, whose 7 Bar ranch they called home, hurrying toward them, a sheaf of telegrams in his hand.

"We didn't expect you to come down to the train, Judge," Rip told him. "We thought you'd have Howie Hallett, or one of the other boys here to drive us out to the ranch."

"I thought it was important enough to come myself," Judge Carver replied. "You've got only a minute or two to decide whether you want to continue on west on this train or wait over till midnight. You heard about Henry Jennifer's murder, I suppose."

"Yes—"

"These telegrams are from Reno and Star City, Nevada. One was sent by William Jennifer; the others are from Blaine Wheeler, the district attorney. He's asking you boys to conduct an official investigation."

Rainbow took the wires and read them aloud hurriedly.

"What do you say, Grump?"

"They sound all right to me," the little man acknowledged. "If we're goin', let's not lose this train. Endorse that check of Conroy's; the judge can deposit it for us. I'll run

up ahead and have 'em put our gear back in the baggage car."

"Don't bother," Judge Carver told him. "I instructed Pat not to let them put it off until we signalled him. There he is, looking this way now." He waved to the station baggage-man to let the stuff go through. The conductor was calling "All aboard!" already.

"I guess this is a hello and goodbye in the same breath," Ripley said. shaking the judge's hand. "Our regards to the boys."

"The train's moving," Carver warned. "Better get aboard."

Grumpy had pulled out his wallet. He counted out five ten-dollar bills and shoved them in the judge's hand.

"You bet that money for me on Pete next week at Green Rivers! You tell that bowlegged buzzard if he don'e win the bronc contest I'll scalp him!"

He ran along the moving train and swung up the steps. After a farewell wave of the hand, the porter closed the door.

RAINBOW reread the telegrams with a peculiar sense of satisfaction. "I had a feeling about this, Grump. I didn't expect it quite so soon, I'll admit."

"Good Josephine, you'll be readin' tea leaves next!" the little man returned sarcastically. "I wouldn't be surprised to hear that when you was a green kid and Henry Jennifer was payin' you thirty a month and cakes, a spirit appeared to you on one of them cold nights out on the Malheur Flats and told you you'd be investigatin' his murder one day."

It didn't fool Rainbow; he knew his doughty partner was as pleased as he that they had been called into the Jennifer case.

"This train is running light," he said; "we shouldn't have any trouble getting space to Reno. If we get there on time, it'll give us about twenty minutes to get across to the N. and O. station. If we make the connection, we'll be in Star City tomorrow evening."

"But Bill Jennifer is askin' us to meet him in Reno, at the Golden," Grumpy reminded him. "Yo're goin' to answer his wire, of course."

Rip shook his head. "I'm not going to answer any of them. We'll be better off if we arrive in Star City without any previous commitments."

The little one's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "That sounds as though Bill Jennifer was under some suspicion in yore mind."

"Why not? He and Ted stand to be among the principal beneficiaries under their father's will. I don't see how they can escape some suspicion, no matter how innocent they may be." He glanced at the telegrams in his hand, noting particularly the time at which they had been filed. "If Bill Jennifer knew the district attorney was trying to get in touch with us, what do you suppose his purpose was in wiring us himself, asking you and me to meet him at the Golden? Why is he so anxious to button-hole us before we have a chance to talk with this man Wheeler?"

The conclusion he was trying to draw was plain. Grumpy rejected it flatly.

"You've got a weak argument when you have to begin it with an if," he declared testily. "I can give you a dozen answers why Jennifer wants to see us, and none of them to his discredit. Mebbe he wants to tip off to somethin'—warn us against somethin', if you want to put it that strong. The only way to git down to cases is to lay over in Reno and have a talk with him tomorrow night."

"All right!" Rainbow snapped, to his surprise, "we'll play it your way. I'll have the porter drop off a telegram to him at Granger."

CHAPTER II

Dead Men Won't Talk

RIP and Grumpy were on familiar ground the moment they stepped through the open doors of the Golden. In many ways it was the unofficial capital of their world. Smiling Bill McCarren, the assistant-manager, greeted them

before they were half-way up to the desk.

"I'll have to put you over in the Annex," he said, pumping hands with them. "Serves you right for not letting me know you were coming. We're full-up; got a couple conventions in town."

"The Annex will be all right," Rip told him. "Is Bill Jennifer stopping with you?"

"Yeh, Bill and his brother Ted. Too bad about the old man, isn't it? I—" He checked himself and shook his head at his denseness. "I guess that explains why you're here; I might have known."

"Keep it under yore hat, Bill," the little one remarked, glancing around the lobby. "I reckon there's a flock of reporters hangin' around coverin' the case."

McCarren nodded. "Three or four from San Francisco. They're going up to Star City tomorrow for the funeral. I'm afraid they'll spot you before you're here very long." He walked up to the desk with them. "As soon as you register, I'll have Dick remove the sheet from the blotter and put in a fresh one. Have you had dinner?

"On the train," Rip replied. "I suppose the Jennifers are upstairs."

"No, they stepped out a minute ago. Ted told me they had an errand to look after and would be back in a second. If you want to wait down here for them, I'll have your bags sent to the room."

"I think we'll go up," said Rainbow. "When they come in, tell them where they can find us."

The partners had been in their room only a few minutes when someone rapped on the door. It was Bill and Ted Jennifer, tall, rawboned men in their twenties. Rip and Grumpy had not seen them since they had grown to manhood, but they were so unmistakably Henry Jennifer's sons that there was no question about their identity. Bill, the elder, did most of the talking.

"I'm sorry we kept you waiting," he said. "We had overlooked something about sending flowers up in the morning; we had to go around the corner and see about it." He was an unsmiling young man, with signs of hard work stamped in his lean face. The same was true of Ted. Their father had started them in young, and they had found the task of holding a string of a dozen or more ranches together and making them show a profit no sinecure.

"That's all right," Rainbow told them. "We just got in. I guess we need another chair here."

"Don't bother," Ted Jennifer said. "I'll just sit on the bed. You know, we often heard the old man speak of you, Ripley—especially after we began to see your name in the papers. He always reminded us that you had worked for him once on the Malheur ranch. Some of the crew you rode with are still on the payroll."

"Yeh," his brother agreed. "We were glad when we got your wire saying you were on the way. Ted and I feel if anyone can get to the bottom of this trouble, you're the men to do it. I don't know whether Gosline told you in Denver that he was going to get in touch with us, but I guess you've surmised by now that he did."

"I understood he was going to contact your district attorney," said Rip.

"He did; he wired Wheeler the same time we heard from him. Ted and I saw Blaine and had a long talk with him about sending for you. He didn't seem to like the idea very much."

"He didn't like it at all," his brother spoke up. "He told us frankly that he felt he ought to have his chance to see what he and the sheriff, Cleve Baker, could do before there was any talk of calling in outsiders. Besides, he said he didn't think he could go to the county commissioners and get a special appropriation for an investigation. When he told us that, we offered to put up the money ourselves, but he wouldn't consider it."

"SO WE decided to go ahead on our own," Bill Jennifer explained. "We came to Reno and talked it over with Mr. Langworth, our lawyer, before we sent for you. I don't want you to get us wrong;

we haven't anything against Blaine Wheeler; we helped to elect him, and we're still for him. We don't want to do anything to give him a black eye with people; but we want this mess cleared up. It would be foolish to try to make any secret of the fact that we've been at odds with the old man of late; he was pretty cantankerous at times. But he was our father, and no matter how much it costs, we intend to see that whoever killed him is made to pay for it."

It had an honest, forthright ring that impressed Grumpy. He flicked a sly, triumphant glance at Rainbow, as though to say his judgment had been vindicated. He was further convinced of it when Ted Jennifer said:

"That isn't the only reason why we want this thing pinned where it belongs. If it isn't cleared up there'll always be some whispering that we knew more about it than we were telling. We weren't very friendly at the end, and there's never been any love lost between us and the present Mrs. Henry Jennifer. We didn't want father to marry her in the first place; we not only thought he was too old to marry again, but that she was interested only in running through his money. We'll let the record prove whether we were right or wrong about it."

"The proof is everywhere," Bill exclaimed bitterly. "But Ted's right; the only way we can clear ourselves so there won't be any question about it is to get at the truth. The old man settled a quarter of a million on Rebecca when he married her, with the understanding that his old will was to stand, giving us the ranches and the rest of the estate. Of course, there was nothing to prevent her from getting him to make a new will. Some people may think that's what we were afraid of and that we took this way of stopping her from grabbing everything."

"I'm afraid that's true," Rainbow declared soberly. "Under the circumstances, some suspicion is bound to touch you. But I wouldn't let it distress me too much; the evidence will take care of that."

Their frankness impressed him, but he was not ready to accept it as proof of their innocence, though he knew he was already prejudiced in their favor.

"Before we go any further," he said, "tell me this: when you got that wire off on Tuesday evening, did you know Wheeler was trying to get in touch with us?"

THE Jennifers straightened up in surprise.

"Why, no!" Ted said positively. "When we talked with him, he didn't give us any encouragement. The last thing we said to him was if he wouldn't send for you, we would. If we'd—"

"Wait a minute, Ted," Bill interjected, his tone tinged with indignation. He turned to Rainbow. "I don't know what was behind your question, but I want you men to get this straight: we weren't trying to cut under Wheeler. If we'd known he'd changed his mind and asked you to come, there'd been no need for us to do it. We weren't trying to get an edge for ourselves."

"It was a fair question," Rip said, without apology. He produced the telegrams and handed them to Jennifer. "We got them together. My point is that we're coming into this case knowing very little about it. We'll have to ask a lot of questions and let the chips fall where they will."

"The boys wouldn't have gone to the district attorney in the first place if they hadn't wanted us to work with him," Grumpy observed, rubbing it in a little. "I wonder why Wheeler changed his mind in such a hurry."

"I wouldn't know," Bill answered, "unless he realized after we left that we meant what we said. He'd hardly be going ahead on his own responsibility; the commissioners must have told him they'd appropriate the money."

"Has he questioned Mrs. Jennifer?" Rip asked.

"Yes, informally, when he came out with the coroner to view the body. He told us he wanted to show her every consideration he could.

They've been more or less friendly."

"Blaine is about the only one in Star City that Rebecca has considered good enough for El Portal," Ted added. "He's often been at the place when she's had people up from California."

Rainbow and Grumpy exchanged a poker-faced glance.

"Have there been any arrests?" the former inquired.

"Not that we know of," said Bill. "Cleve Baker told us he hadn't found even a clue to work on. He never gave out the stuff you've been seeing in the papers. Cleve's not the kind to blow off just to get his name in the headlines."

Ripley had a question or two to ask about the sheriff. If the conversation seemed to go off at a tangent, he was willing to go along with it. But he adroitly reverted to Blaine Wheeler, the district attorney, led the brothers to recall the events on the night their father was murdered, who was in the house at the time, got their version of how the crime had been committed, and all of it without seeming to give his questioning any pattern. In reality, it was as methodical as a cross-examination, and even more productive.

Grumpy took his cue from him and, with apparent guilelessness, drew the two men out. All went well till the partners made their first indirect reference to Martin Jennifer, the half-brother.

"We won't discuss him," Bill said flatly. "We haven't spoken to Martin Jennifer since we were kids. Any information you want about him you'll have to get from someone else; he doesn't set foot on our range, and we don't trespass on his."

Rainbow pretended to take it philosophically. "I understood there was bad feeling between you, but I didn't know it was as bitter as this. I'd call him a principal figure in the case, and we'll have to question him."

"We haven't any use for him, but we're not accusing him of anything. I imagine that's better than he'll say about us."

Grumpy rattled on about something else. Both he and Rip presented the brothers with several opportunities to unburden their minds about Rebecca, but they restrained themselves. When another half-hour had passed, Rip glanced at his watch. It was after eleven.

"I guess we've gone as far as we can," he said. "We'll be on the train in the morning. We'll have a talk with Wheeler and the sheriff; that's about all we can do till after the funeral."

"If one of us has to go north, we'll let you know," Bill told him. "Otherwise, you'll find us at the Wagon Wheel. If anything goes wrong with your arrangements with Wheeler, get in touch with Ted or me before you throw up the job."

"I don't believe anything will go wrong," Rainbow said. "But we'll keep in touch with you."

HE WAS well satisfied with what the evening had developed, and after the Jennifers had left, he admitted as much to the little one.

"I'm glad we followed your hunch and stayed over in Reno tonight, Grump. We're going up to Star City armed with one fact that will set us straight on a lot of things. We know why Wheeler changed his mind so suddenly."

Grumpy nodded. "Mrs. Jennifer?"

"There can't be any doubt of it. Just put the facts together. Wheeler is young, single, ambitious, and Rebecca Jennifer's friend. It evidently wasn't difficult for her to persuade him. When he told her that Jim and Ted had threatened to call us in if he didn't, she was alarmed, for some reason. I don't pretend to know what she had to fear, but it's pretty obvious that she felt she'd be safer if Wheeler was in a position to keep his finger on us."

"I wouldn't read too much into it," the little man advised. He smoked his pipe contemplatively for a moment or two. "Whether she's innocent or not, she's in a tough spot, Rip; she knows the Jennifers and local public opinion will be ag'in her. If she has any reason to believe that Wheeler will stand by her, it's only

natural for her to turn to him. Are you goin' to say anythin' about it tomorrow?"

"No, we'll just file it away for future reference. If Wheeler is just befriending Mrs. Jennifer, that's certainly his privilege. It'll be something else if he's sold out to her. We'll know about that before long. I'm interested enough now to want to see this thing through no matter how tough it gets." He had made a few notes. "Suppose we boil these down and see what we've got."

"Go ahead," the little man invited, settling back in his chair.

"On the night Mr. Jennifer was murdered, his wife retired early; he remained down in the library, reading. His body was found there, and it is presumed that he never left that room. It was a windy night, doors and windows rattling. In the main wing of the house, the only persons known to have been there, other than Mr. and Mrs. Jennifer, were Mrs. Ida Atlee, the housekeeper, and Laura, Mrs. Jennifer's maid. Right?"

"Yeh, that's the way I got it."

"No one heard any sounds of a scuffle. According to the coroner, the murder occurred about midnight. The top of Mr. Jennifer's head had been bashed in by some heavy object. The sheriff has not found the murder weapon."

"The job was done with a gun barrel, no doubt," Grumpy suggested. "And it took a tall, powerful man to do it; Jennifer was a six-footer."

Rainbow walked over to the window, lowered it, and aired the room.

"What makes you think a gun was used?" he asked.

"Because I don't believe the crime was premeditated. It's my hunch that old Slick-ear wasn't sittin' up to do some readin'; I think he had a visitor, and they rowed. Or if that wasn't the case, somebody got into the house for some purpose other than killin' him, was seen, and then had to knock him off. Accordin' to the boys, their father was in good health right to the last; he often went ridin' up Blue Valley and through the Rose Creek hills. If anybody had planned to kill him, that was the best way to do it. He could have been picked off easy enough."

"That sounds logical," Rip admitted, closing the window. He stood there a moment, gazing down at Center Street. Across the way, a short-order restaurant was crowded. "Let's get back to what Bill and Ted had to say. On the night of the murder, they were at the Wagon Wheel house, a mile up the valley from El Portal. They had just come down from the north. They sat around talking with Clane Goodnight, the Wagon Wheel foreman, until ten o'clock. Then they went to bed. They saw no one after that until Goodnight awakened them with the news that Mr. Jennifer had been killed."

"That's the way they told it," the little one agreed. "They left themselves wide open; no alibi or nothin' to account for their movements between ten at night and six in the mornin'. They could have left the house, made their way down to El Portal, killed their father, and got back home without bein' seen."

"YEH," Rip murmured noncommittally. The little man straightened up incredulously.

"Good Josephine, you don't mean to tell me you believe that's what happened! They sounded all right to me—a little hot-headed like old Henry, but all right!"

"They sounded all right to me, too," the tall man acknowledged. "All I'm doing is examining the possibilities, just as I expect you to do when we get around to Martin Jennifer and everyone else who is a suspect. In their case, their own story establishes the fact they could have committed the crime. That's the only point I'm trying to make. What we think about it is another matter. But that's enough of this for tonight. Get your hat and we'll take a walk down Commercial Row and have a drink and something to eat."

It was unthinkable to them to be in Reno even briefly without looking the town over. They took a turn up Virginia Street as far as the river,

and then came back to the Row. They found the usual noise and excitement in the Oberon and Palace. Later, they drifted into the Oasis. Ginger Smith, the manager, greeted them familiarly.

"When did you hit town?" he inquired, motioning at the same time for a bartender to set out glasses and a bottle.

"A few hours ago," said Rip. "Feels good to be back." His glance ran over the room. The long lunch counter, with its row of high stools, was in its accustomed place, facing the bar. "See you've got a new cook."

"Yeh, he's good. You boys going to eat?"

"We're goin' to have a sandwich or somethin'," Grumpy answered.

They tossed off their drink and Ginger went over to the counter with them and sat down next to Rainbow. There were half-a-dozen small tables in the rear. Three men were seated at one. Two of them might have been ranch-hands; the third was an old-timer, with the dusty, faded look of a desert rat about him. He'd had a few drinks, but he wasn't drunk. The other two, who were stone sober, appeared to be intent on putting the old man under the table, for he would no sooner empty his glass than they refilled it and urged him to drink up.

Rip watched the performance for a few minutes without saying anything. He gathered that there was a difference of opinion between the three. The old-timer wanted to say something, but every time he began, the others shut him up, and he was getting angrier by the minute. Rip finally nudged the manager.

"Ginger, who are those men back there?"

"The short, chunky one is Pete Rapp, a bronc buster," Ginger explained, after glancing over his shoulder at the trio at the table. "He comes in here once in a while. I don't know anything about him except that he works for a man named Frank Ruby on a horse ranch up near Star City. The black-haired gent is a stranger to me. The old boy is Opal Charlie. Grumpy ought to know him; Charlie's been hunting opals across Nevada for forty years."

"Shore!" the little one confirmed, squinting at the old man. "That's Opal Charlie, all right! What's that pair doing? Fillin' him full of red-eye, so they can roll him?"

"I don't believe so," said Ginger. "Charlie never has any money on him. The first thing he does when he hits town is to hold out a few dollars for a little bender and turn the rest over to Mike Brady for safe-keeping. . .I'll break this up."

"No, don't," Rainbow urged. "The old boy's got something on his chest, and they're not going to be able to keep him from airing it. Let's listen a minute or two."

"Come on, Charlie," one of the men urged, "we'll make this the last one and then we'll take you over to Mike's place and put you to bed."

The old man knocked the glass to the floor.

"I'm sober as a jedge!" he burst out irritably. "I don't need no lookin' after! Don't try to shet me up every time I open my mouth! I tell yuh, I saw 'em—two of 'em! They didn't know me and the burro was on that slope!"

"Sure, Charlie!" one of the pair pretended to agree. "Suppose we go around to Mike's; you can tell us all about it when we git there."

"I'm tellin' yuh right now!" the old man cackled shrilly. "Them fellars stopped. One of 'em struck a match and lit a cigarette. I saw his face. I'd know him, too!"

HIS companions exchanged a nod. They got to their feet and grabbed the old man. Putting him in between them, they hurried out, one of them telling a curious bartender that they were going to put Charlie to bed.

"That talk make any sense to you boys?" Ginger asked. The partners were about to say no, when the old man shrieked:

"Let me go! I gotta talk to somebody who'll do sunthin'! I tell you it was only a couple miles east of that fancy place old Henry built him-

self! I know them fellas was the ones!"

Grumpy whipped around on his stool as though he were controlled by hidden wires.

"Rip—did you catch that? You know what he's talkin' about now, don't you?"

"Come on!" the tall man rapped. "The sandwich will have to wait!"

Though they reached the street not more than half a minute after the three men had disappeared through the swinging doors, they were not in sight. An alley opened off the Row a few feet away. Rip glanced into it. It was dark, but he caught the scuffing of feet on the cobbles. With Grumpy at his elbow, he darted into the alley. The lights were bright in back of them and revealed them clearly to anyone looking toward the street.

A gun flashed redly in the blackness. The slug pinged off the brick wall at Rip's elbow. In the narrow confines of the alley, the shot boomed with a hollow sound. It was punctuated with the thud of a body hitting the cobblestones and the sound of running feet.

Afraid to risk a shot, for fear of hitting the old man, the partners hugged the wall and picked their way forward. They found Opal Charlie curled up on the rough pavement. A shot along Commercial Row was hardly a novelty, but Rip knew it would draw a crowd and a policeman. Putting the old man over his shoulder, he carried him into the Oasis by way of a rear door.

Ginger Smith came hurrying back.

"They slugged him," Rip told him. "He's coming out of it. Have you got some place we can put him till the excitement dies down?"

"We can take him upstairs to my place. What's this all about, Rip?"

"Ginger, I could tell you it's nothing important," the tall man said, after a moment's hesitation. "I'd rather not say anything at all. Do you mind? The old man isn't hurt much. When he's able to walk, we'll get him around to Brady's place, and that'll be the end of it, as far as you're concerned."

"Okay! But what about the police? Dick Ewing will be in, asking questions."

"Tell him it was a drunken row, nobody hurt. If he wants to see us, advise him to drop around to the Golden."

They got the old man upstairs. He had a long story to tell, but stripped down to the facts, it added little to what he had blurted out in the saloon. He had come down through the Rose Creek Mountains on the evening Henry Jennifer had been murdered, and camped several miles east of El Portal. There, he had seen the two horsemen, as he had explained.

"They musta bin the ones that got old Slick-ear," he insisted.

"Very likely," Rip agreed. "You're sure you could recognize the one who lit the cigarette?"

"Yes, sir! He sat tall in the saddle. Clean-shaven fella."

"Where did you leave yore burro?" Grumpy asked.

"In Star City, in Ed Huesser's barn."

The little one turned to Rainbow. "We better take him up with us in the mornin'. He'll be safe there. Will you agree to that, Charlie? We'll put you up at the hotel and pay yore expenses."

"Yeh, I'll go. Henry allus gave me free run of his range. If I kin help to snag the gents thet killed him, it won't be no more than I owe him."

AN HOUR later, the partners got him around to Mike Brady's rooming house and told Mike to look after him. Instead of returning to the Oasis, they went to the hotel and turned in. Dawn was just breaking when someone rattled their door. It was Dick Ewing, the Reno policeman. He wasn't any stranger to them.

"You boys had a little trouble this evening, didn't you?" Ewing inquired.

"It didn't amount to anything," said Rip. "We saw a couple men heading down the alley with old Opal Charlie. He didn't want to go with them, so we took him away from

them. We walked Charlie around to Brady's place and turned him over to Mike. That's about all there was to it."

"That's how Ginger told me it was," Ewing observed. "I wouldn't have got you up at this hour, but Opal Charlie is dead."

"What?" Grumpy jerked out.

"A train hit him. The body was found just beyond the Southern Pacific depot. He either walked out of his room, or was taken out. Mike didn't see him leave. I'm wondering whether it was murder or an accident."

"It must have been an accident, Dick." Rainbow's gray eyes were inscrutable. "The old boy was pretty well liquored. I suppose he dressed himself and wandered across the tracks. It's too bad."

"Well, that's the way these oldtimers go," Ewing declared weightily. "You can't teach 'em anything; they're worse'n kids.'

He apologized for disturbing them. Grumpy stared at Rip as Ewing's footsteps receded down the hall.

"Accident?" he growled sarcastically. "Accident, my foot! Opal Charlie was murdered, and you know why!"

Rainbow nodded. There was a sober look on his lean face. "He was murdered, sure enough!"

CHAPTER III

Tall in the Saddle

THE eight o'clock train for Star City usually departed without fuss and with very few passengers aboard. This morning, however, when Rip and Grumpy reached the depot, ten minutes before the train was scheduled to leave, they found the coaches well-filled already and little groups of men standing around on the station platform. Most of them were Renoites, friends and acquaintances of Henry Jennifer—lawyers and members of different organizations to which he had belonged—who were going up to pay their last respects to him.

In the smoker, the four newspapermen from San Francisco, had turned back a seat and were playing hearts. A little group of young men and women, friends of Mrs. Jennifer, had come up from California. They had found seats in the rear coach. The windows were open, and the partners caught stray bits of conversation from them that explained who they were.

"F a s h i o n a b l e - l o o k i n' folks," Grumpy observed. "If that's the kind of company old Slick-ear's been keepin,' he must have had to pinch himself every once in a while to be sure he wasn't dreamin'. When I knew him, he'd go for a month without even changin' his shirt. Funny what money will do to a man."

When Bill and Ted Jennifer arrived they had Thomas Langworth, their attorney, with them. They introduced the elderly lawyer. The partners spoke with them briefly, and several minutes later, found seats for themselves in the rear car. The little one caught Rainbow focusing his attention on the group from California.

"That one in the blue hat is a humdinger, ain't she?" he muttered. Rip frowned.

"To listen to them, you'd think they were going to a wedding rather than a funeral."

A tall, blond young man came down the aisle, obviously looking for someone. His face was clean cut, even handsome, with cold, pale blue eyes, and he had an air about him that gave him a certain distinction. When Rebecca's friends sighted him, they greeted him warmly. They called him Kurt.

The girl in the blue hat moved over, and he sat down on the arm of her seat.

"This must have been a shock to you, Kurt," one of the young men said. "The last time I saw you you told me the old man had agreed to put up the money for your well. I don't suppose Rebecca will go through with it."

"Neither do I," said Kurt. "She will undoubtedly have other things to do with her money. It would have been just the same if this had not happened. Mr. Jennifer wrote me a

week or more ago that he had changed his mind. He was very definite about it. But the oil is there. I will find someone else, and it will make him millions."

He spoke without slurring his words, the way a foreigner does who learns to speak English on the Continent.

Grumpy caught Rip's eye. "German," he said.

"Yeh. He's got me interested. I'd like to know more about the deal Mr. Jennifer was going into with him."

He overheard Kurt ask about mutual acquaintances. Santa Barbara was mentioned repeatedly.

"I hope Rebecca decides to come back to civilization," the girl in the blue hat said. "Nevada is not for her. I'm surprised she stuck it out this long."

THE train got under way shortly, and the clattering of the wheels drowned out the conversation in the seats ahead. As soon as Reno had been left behind, the passengers began to close the windows against the clouds of dust that began to blow in.

The train had just rounded the long curve north of town when the door opened and a man walked through the coach, looking for a seat. He was tall, broad of shoulder and powerfully built. His black hair was faintly tinged with gray, and he appeared to be in his early forties. His face was strong, the mouth rather hard, as though some ancient bitterness had left its mark on him. The partners glanced at him with peculiar interest as he passed. They turned to each other then, an unasked question on their lips.

"That could have been Mr. Jennifer twenty-five years ago," said Rainbow. "He even used to hold his head like that, his jaws tight and a little surly and defiant."

"No question about it, that's Martin Jennifer," the little man averred confidently. "He'd be about ten years older than Bill. I didn't expect he'd be showin' up for the funeral. I don't suppose he's got a friend on this train."

"He doesn't look as though it bothered him any. I don't believe you'll see him at his father's funeral. I don't think the funeral has anything to do with his being on the train. Chances are he had some business in Reno, and when he finished with it, he couldn't see any reason why he shouldn't return to his ranch. That's the way Mr. Jennifer would have seen it. It would be foolish to try to talk to him this morning."

Grumpy was silent for a time.

"Funny all three of 'em should have been in town last night," he observed thoughtfully.

"I don't know. What's funny about it?"

"A man was murdered in Reno last night who might have been a star witness. Your German friend up there was in Reno, too, if he should happen to fit into this case, somehow."

"It could have been a coincidence." Rip argued.

"Yeh, that's all we can make out of it so far. By the way, are you going to say anything to this district attorney about Opal Charlie?"

"I don't know any reason why we should. We'll keep that up our sleeve and hope it turns out to be an ace in the hole."

It was a three-hour ride to Star City. It was a typical Nevada county seat, and like Reno, it was "big for its size," according to a line on the leading hotel's stationery. The New Star Hotel was really new, and it was well kept. Grumpy expressed his approval after inspecting the double room to which he and Rip were assigned.

"If the food is any good, we'll be all right here," he declared. "Let's wash the cinders out of our ears before we walk up to the court-house."

They could see the building through the window. It was the usual architectural monstrosity, with heavy fluted white columns and a gilded dome, with which western counties like to afflict themselves. The district attorney occupied two rooms, one his private office, the oth-

er a larger room for the clerks and for storing the files.

A clerk took the partners' names into Wheeler. They received a surprise a moment later, for when the door to the private office opened, the blond young man they had seen on the train stepped out. Wheeler was with him. He came over to Rip and the little one and greeted them heartily.

"It's a pleasure to see you," he said. "I've read so much about you, especially the Black Rock and Nevada City cases you handled, that it's like meeting a couple old acquaintances. Come in!"

"I'll be running along, Blaine," the young man of the train said.

"Wait a second, Kurt!" Wheeler insisted. "I want you to meet these boys." He made the introduction. Kurt Von Roehm and shook hands with them.

"I noticed you this morning on the way up from Reno," he told them. "I had no idea you were the famous detectives. If you are going to be here some time, I will look forward to seeing you again."

"Kurt's an oil man," Wheeler explained. "He's a dyed-in-the-wool wildcatter. According to him there's oil out on the Black Rock Desert. He's leased a lot of it but hasn't put a hole down yet." He turned and spoke to Von Roehm. "I know Rebecca would appreciate it if you escorted her to the funeral. She seems to be taking it bravely, but she's pretty much alone, Kurt; you can understand that."

"Yes, I know," Von Roehm murmured. "I'll do what I can, and I'll see you at the church." He bowed again. "I'll bid you good-morning, gentlemen."

RIP and the little one went inside and sat down with Wheeler. The latter had a pleasant manner and a habit of catching one's eye and smiling before he spoke. His face was intelligent rather than shrewd. Not only were his clothes in good taste, but he was fastidiously clean. Altogether, he had more the appearance of a successful professional man, with a city background, than a sage-brush prosecutor. Rainbow could understand why he fitted nicely into Rebecca Jennifer's parties.

"When did you reach Reno?" Wheeler asked.

"Last evening," Rip informed him. "We went to the Golden. Bill and Ted Jennifer came up to the room. We had a long talk." He had no hesitancy in speaking of it. In fact, he wondered if the district attorney hadn't been informed about the meeting and was taking this way of fishing for an admission or denial.

"Naturally, they'd want to talk to you. They were anxious to have you step in. What did they have to say?"

Though he did his best not to show his displeasure, Rainbow could see that Wheeler didn't like the disclosure, indicating that this was the first he knew of it.

"I imagine it was about the same story they gave you," Rip said. "They didn't accuse anyone."

"They say anything about Martin?"

"Not a word. Bill told us if we wanted any information about the man, we'd have to get it from someone else. They don't like Mrs. Jennifer, but beyond being opposed to the marriage and claiming that she had been running through their father's fortune, they had nothing to say against her. In fact, their chief worry seems to be that they may be suspected of the crime."

Wheeler seemed vaguely relieved. "I know," he remarked. "I believe they're as innocent as you are. But Bill and Ted are supersensitive. They got a little hot under the collar when they came to me about you and I asked for a little time to think it over." He fixed his eyes on Rainbow and smiled. "You don't spend money in this county until the commissioners have given you the nod to go ahead."

Rip gave him a nod of understanding. They discussed terms and the matter of authority. The arrangement was satisfactory to the partners. But when they made it plain that they insisted on having a free

hand in making their investigation Wheeler became a shade less affable.

"I expected you'd work with me and the sheriff," he declared.

"Don't misunderstand our point," said Rip. "We want to work with you, but that doesn't mean through you. In other words, we want to be in a position to exercise our own judgment on what leads to pursue. We'll confer with you whenever you want and keep you posted on what we're doing. We're not interested in taking any headlines away from you. This case is going to be watched with interest all over the state. It can mean a great deal to you."

Blaine fixed them with his eyes and his smile expanded to a grin. "I'm glad you speak so frankly. I won't pretend I'm not aware of what the case could do for me. When you're in politics, you've got to take advantage of the breaks if you want to get anywhere." He lowered his voice confidentially. "This is just between the three of us, of course."

THE partners nodded. Rip glanced at his watch.

"It's almost noon," he said. "I know you want to get away. Suppose I ask you a few questions; that'll save time."

"Fire away," Wheeler urged.

"All right. We'll begin with Mrs. Jennifer. We understand from what we're read that she has been married three or four times, always to wealthy men. Where did Mr. Jennifer meet her?"

"In Santa Barbara, California. He was in the habit of spending his winters down there of late. Do you want me to sketch the background?"

"If you will."

"Mrs. Jennifer—she was Mrs. Kelland at the time; there had been a divorce—was living in Santa Barbara. Mr. Jennifer had been acquainted with her for some time. He was getting along in years, but he was still a vigorous man. He called Bill and Ted down there and informed them he was going to marry Mrs. Kelland. It caused an explosion, but he married her. When she objected to moving up here to live, they rented a big place in the hills above Santa Barbara. It was not a ranch-house by any means, but Mr. Jennifer insisted on surrounding himself with cowboys and Indians to make it more home-like." He shook his head. "I understand it was a trying experience for Mrs. Jennifer. But they compromised their differences and he built El Portal for her. It is a magnificent place."

"Was the old man happy with her?" Grumpy asked.

"Perfectly, I believe. Before they settled down here, they went East for a few months and purchased all the furnishings. She has exquisite taste. You'll agree with me when you see the paintings and porcelains. The furniture is hand-carved and very beautiful. The main rooms are all panelled, of course."

Rainbow was not interested in listening to further rhapsodizing about the wonders of El Portal. "How much of her time has Mrs. Jennifer spent here? She's made frequent trips down to California, I presume."

"Yes, a number. She'd be away a day or two.

"Was Mr. Jennifer in the habit of accompanying her?"

"Not when she just ran down to the city." City was just another Nevada term for San Francisco, Rip understood. "Mr. Jennifer was not a lonely man, Ripley, if that's what you are trying to establish. There were a good many guests—friends from California—and he thoroughly enjoyed having them around. I've been invited a number of times, so I speak from personal observation."

"What about the servants," the little one inquired. "Who hired 'em?"

"Mrs. Jennifer." He gave Grumpy an indulgent smile. "I can understand your asking, but the first thing Baker and I did was to question the help. I can't hold out any hope to you in that direction. Stony Wiggins, a banged-up old puncher, has charge of the stables. I consider him harmless. The gardener is an elderly Mexican. The only other man there is Gar Chang, the Chinese cook." He shook his head. "I think you can dismiss the idea that one of

the servants committed the crime. We found several hundred dollars in Mr. Jennifer's purse, so robbery couldn't have been the motive."

"Have you any idea what it was?" Rainbow questioned.

Blaine tilted back in his chair and pursed his lips as he stared at the ceiling. "No," he said. "It's difficult to ascribe a motive with so little evidence available. It could have been an old grudge; Mr. Jennifer had stepped on the toes of a number of men—fights over water rights, range and other things. But the feeling exists in me that it wasn't that; that whoever killed him was really striking at Mrs. Jennifer."

Rainbow's head went up a little. "That sounds like Bill and Ted."

"Not necessarily; there's Martin. He's aired his hatred of his father as long as I can remember. He's let everyone know he despises Rebecca Jennifer."

"Has he been questioned?"

"Yes, he came in here the day the murder was discovered and told me he would undoubtedly be accused of it. He'd been in town the previous evening until almost midnight. On his way home, he could easily have turned off the Furnace Creek road and reached El Portal."

"Was he alone that night?"

"No, Pixley, his foreman, was with him. They had shipped a carload of calves that day. He said frankly that these things could be used against him. He was excited and belligerent. He insisted on being questioned. But I couldn't pin anything on him. You understand that I am not accusing him."

"YOU couldn't without havin' somethin' to back it up," Grumpy put in. "Would a man have any trouble gittin' into old Henry's place?"

"No. We found several of the French windows open on the lower floor."

"And you speak about Martin turnin' off on his way home. In what direction does his place lie?"

"East of town, on the other side of the Rose Creek hills."

The little one nodded soberly. Rip knew he was thinking of the two men Opal Charlie claimed he had seen east of El Portal that night. The tall man picked up the conversation quickly.

"Isn't it a fact, Wheeler, that Martin Jennifer did not stand to gain a penny by the death of his father?"

"That's true," Blaine agreed. "It was long before my time, but I know that when Mr. Jennifer gave Martin the Double Diamond ranch that he waived all future claims to the estate." He picked up a cigarette and placed it between his lips without lighting it. "The thing is a hopeless muddle! I don't care which way you turn, you find yourself running into contradictions that stop you cold!"

A clerk came in and whispered something in Wheeler's ear.

"Tell them no comment!" he burst out impatiently. "Tell them I haven't any statement to make!" The young man started to leave, only to be called back. "I've changed my mind, Horace; tell them to wait." Blaine turned to the partners. "Reporters waiting outside. I've got to tell them something. Have you talked with any of them?"

"No," said Rip.

"Fine! I can at least tell them that you boys are working on the case." Rainbow shrugged.

"If that will satisfy them, go ahead. There's just one or two more things I'd like to ask before we break up." Rainbow waited a moment. "You've had time to run over all the possibilities, Wheeler. Has it ever occurred to you that Rebecca Jennifer might have hired someone to kill her husband?"

The question rocked the district attorney for a moment. He tossed his unlit cigarette away. "I can't say that anything as absurd as that has occurred to me," he said stiffly. "What would she have had to gain by having Mr. Jennifer put out of the way? He had already made a settlement on her, and she knew she was not included among his heirs. If she was tired of him, or regretted her bargain, divorce is easy in this state.

Her residence in Nevada was established. Incompatability would have been enough to free her of him. . . You boys must see what I mean."

"I'd say the question had been well answered," Rip returned easily. "Now tell me this: where does Kurt Von Roehm fit into the picture? Is he an old friend of Mrs. Jennifer?"

"Yes, he knew the Jennifers in California—both of them." Instead of being surprised by the question, Blaine seemed to welcome it. "He maintains an office in Reno and has established a camp out on the desert. He keeps a man there to assist him in his explorations."

"How long has he been around Reno?"

"About a year. He came up to visit at El Portal. He spent several weeks on the Black Rock and got excited about it. Kurt's been in Nevada ever since."

"What about this oil business he was workin' on with the old man?" Grumpy inquired. "We overheard him sayin' on the train this mornin' that Henry had changed his mind about goin' in with him."

WHEELER laughed. "I'm afraid this is another disappointment; it isn't the lead it seems to be. But I'm glad you brought it up. I knew about the deal, of course. Mr. Jennifer was going to put up forty thousand dollars so Kurt could drill his test well. A week before he was killed, he changed his mind about it. That would seem to hold the possibility that Von Roehm had killed the old gentleman out of revenge." He pulled out a desk drawer and produced a letter. "You will be surprised when I tell you that Kurt came in here a few minutes ago to give me this. It's Mr. Jennifer's letter, stating that he had decided not to go through with the deal. You will find it's tone very friendly. Here, read it!"

Rainbow was forced to agree that it was a very friendly message. In it, Henry Jennifer expressed the hope that his unfavorable decision would not affect the pleasant relations they enjoyed, and stated that he and Rebecca would be looking forward to seeing him at El Portal in the very near future.

"The letter is interesting," said Rip, "but it hardly gives us a clue to what Von Roehm's reaction to the bad news might have been. To have forty thousand dollars snatched away like this, when he had evidently been counting on it, could have been reason enough to bring him up to El Portal in the hope of inducing Mr. Jennifer to change his mind—"

"Failing in that, it could have led to a violent quarrel and ended in murder," Wheeler finished for him. He shook his head once more. "It's like the other leads that suggest themselves, Ripley; they no sooner open up than they run into a blank wall. Nat Goodwin was playing in Reno on the night Mr. Jennifer was killed. Kurt attended the performance. Here is a list of a dozen people he spoke with at the McKissick Opera House. They are all well-known Reno ladies and gentlemen. He insists that I corroborate his story by getting in touch with them. We can do it, but you know he's telling the truth or he wouldn't be inviting us to check on him."

"Pretty difficult to break down an alibi like that," Rip acknowledged. He must regard the circumstances as dangerous to him, or he wouldn't be coming to you like this."

"Naturally! He's quite frank about it. He feels if his name is dragged into the case it'll injure his chances of getting someone to finance his proposition."

"Is he pressed for money?"

"I haven't any reason to think so. He's always given me to understand he has a regular income from some Mexican oil royalties. You're free to question him at any time, of course. He doesn't expect any favors or special treatment on account of my friendship with him, I'm sure." He pushed back his chair and got to his feet. "Are you settled at the hotel?"

"Yes," Rip said, picking up his hat.

"You'll be comfortable there. I'll have Cleve Baker look you up. The funeral will take up most of the afternoon. We can get together again

this evening if you think it's necessary."

"No, we'll talk to Baker and see what he can do about getting some horses for us. We want to have a look around and try to get things fixed in our minds."

"Certainly," Wheeler agreed. "Just remember the door is always open here. I realize I haven't been much help to you."

"I wouldn't say that," the tall man demurred. "We've cleared away some of the dead wood, and that's important. There's a crack in the wall somewhere, and we'll have to find it. It's a peculiar situation when you see all of the principals in this case, at least all who are known to us at this time, saying: 'I know someone will suspect me of killing Henry Jennifer. I didn't have anything to do with it, and you've got to prove my innocence."

The prosecutor nodded. "One of them is lying."

"Unless there's another figure in this murder. That could be the answer."

The partners passed the reporters unrecognized. Going down the courthouse steps, Grumpy turned a puzzled face to Rainbow.

"I don't git all this backin' and fillin'," he growled. "What do you make of it, Rip—of Wheeler, I mean?"

"I think he's going to be tough until we get enough to make him toe the line. Right now, he's got only two things on his mind—Rebecca Jennifer and himself. He got a taste of life at El Portal that's turned his head a little. He may even be in love with Mrs. Jennifer. I thought he protested a little too much about his friendship for Von Roehm. I believe he'd be willing to toss him, or any one of the three Jennifers, to the wolves to get a conviction."

"That," said the little one, "is jest about how I feel. You go on back to the hotel; I'm goin' to drop around to the livery barn where Opal Charlie left his burro and see what I can learn about Frank Ruby and his hoss ranch."

CHAPTER IV

The Sheriff's Story

RAINBOW was shaving when Grumpy thumped into the room and tossed his hat on the bed.

"Wal, I got some information on this fella Ruby," he announced. "His ranch is about ten miles southeast of town, on the other side of these Rose Crick foothills we've heard mentioned. The most interestin' part of it is that he's Martin Jennifer's neighbor."

"How long has he been around?"

"Some time. He's been runnin' his ranch a couple years. Before that, he used to round up wild hosses out on the desert. He'd cull out the broomtails and sell 'em for chicken feed down in Petaluma. He'd break the good ones and git rid of 'em to the cow outfits. He keeps a crew of five, six men now."

Rip drew his razor over his chin. "What's his record?" he asked without moving his lips.

"He's never been in trouble, I gather. But he ain't liked; mean when he drinks. Martin Jennifer and him git along, they say." The little one sat down heavily. "That's about all I've got to tell you. It ain't much."

"It's considerable," Rip answered, reaching for a towel. "If Ruby knows the Black Rock that well and has been around for years, you can be sure he wasn't any stranger to Opal Charlie. So he couldn't have been the man who struck the match that night, or he would have recognized him."

"There was two of 'em he said," Grumpy reminded. "It could have the other one."

"But the other man was certainly not Martin Jennifer; Opal Charlie was surely acquainted with Martin."

"If you feel that way about it," Grumpy muttered irascibly, "why not go the rest of the way and say that he knew Bill and Ted, too! Then we can forget the old man's story!"

Rip smiled. "We won't be that foolish. Old Charlie saw two men in those hills that night who had no

honest reason for being abroad. We can be sure of that part of it. It's still the best clue we've got. If we can put our hands on the pair who had him in tow last night, we ought to be able to get somewhere."

"If?" the little man snorted derisively. "You dang well know we won't find them hangin' around Ruby's ranch, waitin' for us! If we git anythin' it'll have to come from Ruby himself. Pull on yore shirt and let's go down an eat!"

When they came down the stairs, they found the newspapermen waiting for them. They introduced themselves.

"Wheeler just told us you had been called into the case," one of them said. "We'd like to get a statement from you."

"It's a little early for that," Rainbow countered. "We haven't had time to turn around, yet."

"This Jennifer case must have a sentimental interest for you, Ripley," another observed. "Wheeler told us you used to be one of his cowpunchers."

Rainbow nodded. "I was just a kid."

"That's a good human interest angle. Would you give me a little color?"

"No, I'll have to sidestep anything like that. The less you have to say about us, the better we'll like it."

There was a line of people waiting to get into the crowded dining room. One of the reporters followed the partners over to the door.

"Ripley, do you think there's any connection between this murder and the release of Spanish Joe Gartiez from the Carson City penitentiary? He came out about a month ago, after doing better than ten years."

RAINBOW gave him a guileless glance.

"What makes you think there might be a connection?"

"Just that Joe's troubles began when Jennifer had him sent up for slashing one of his foremen; there'd been a row over some rustling. Gartiez was a bad boy in Carson. He knifed a guard and got five years more for that. Tried to make a break a couple times. For the past week or so, he's been seen around Reno."

Rip felt Grumpy's heel on his foot, but the warning wasn't necessary; the tall man's face failed to betray the slightest sign of surprise.

"Did you put it up to Wheeler?" he asked.

"A few minutes ago. He didn't think there was anything in it."

"Then we won't have to waste any time on that pipedream," the little one said pointedly. "I never can figger out why you boys always want to play detective. Why don't you stick to yore scribblin'?"

The reporter hung on for a few minutes. Their complete lack of interest finally discouraged him. The partners found no opportunity to comment on what they had just heard until they were seated in the dining room. But they had only to exchange a glance to realize that they were of the same opinion about it.

"That lad may have put his finger on somethin'," Grumpy began. "I'd shore like to see a picture of Joe Gartiez."

"So would I!" Rip declared sharply. "It well may have been Gartiez who got rid of Opal Charlie. We won't wait for Baker to hunt us up; when we get done eating, we'll go to his office and look over his files."

When they walked into the sheriff's office, they found only a deputy there. He said his name was Hank Stauffer. "Cleve went up the valley this morning," he told them. "I reckon he'll be back most any minute."

Rip was just as well satisfied that Baker wasn't there. Without disclosing what he was looking for, he began going through the "morgue." The old records had become dog-eared, but they were fairly complete.

"If you're looking for anyone in particular, maybe I could help you," Stauffer offered.

Rainbow said no; that they were just interested in looking through the local files. He showed Grumpy several posters as he turned the pages. When they found Gartiez' picture, they gazed at it without com-

ment. The years had not changed the man very much. Beyond any doubt he was one of the two who had hustled Opal Charlie out of the Oasis Saloon.

Hank Stauffer, impressed with the importance of the visitors, tried to make conversation, when they wanted nothing so much as to be alone for a minute. He finally carried a chair outside and found a shady spot beneath the big cottonwood that grew by the hitch-rack.

"Somebody ought to kick us!" Rip muttered savagely. "To think we had a break like this handed us last night and muffed it! You'd think a wise guy like Ginger would have known who was in town. I don't believe we'd have been quite so dumb if we'd been tipped off that one of those gents was Gartiez. I don't suppose there's any use cryin' over spilt milk."

"It's good for the feelin's, at least," the little one declared dryly. "Gartiez may be our man. If Henry Jennifer's murder was a hired job, I'd be willin' to say he did it."

"If he wasn't the actual killer, or accomplice, he was at least close enough to the killing to know all about it. That's indisputable. If I thought he could be picked up, I'd ask Wheeler to send out a notice on him."

"We'd lose more'n we'd gain," said Grumpy. "I don't know how far he'll run, but it'll be just as easy to take him into custody a week or two from now as it would this afternoon—easier, I reckon. I guess this must be Baker," he added, nodding in the direction of the horseman who was pulling up at the rack. 'Got a good head on him. Looks like he had some sense."

IT WAS the sheriff. He shoved out his hand as he stepped in. There was a friendly twinkle in his puckered eyes.

"I saw Ted Jennifer on my way into town. He told me you had arrived. I'm mighty proud to have a chance to work with you. You've seen Wheeler, I take it."

"We had a long talk with him," said Rip. "We want to get your slant. Then, there may be some things he missed."

"I eat in that little restaurant across the street," Cleve answered. "Suppose you come across with me and we can talk while I'm having my dinner. I want to leave myself time enough to get out of these clothes and clean up a bit before the services."

They walked over with him. Grumpy mentioned that they would need horses. Baker said he'd look after that.

The restaurant held only one or two people at this late hour, so they spoke freely. The sheriff's answers to Rip's questions were frank and definite. There was little he could tell the partners that was new, however.

"We might not have been in the dark this way if Wheeler had listened to me," he said. "You might as well know it; a little coolness has developed between us over this case. I don't like to push people around, but if Mrs. Jennifer is as innocent as she professes to be, I feel she should be willing, even anxious, to do everything possible to help us."

Rainbow and Grumpy were listening with even greater interest than they permitted him to see.

"When I went up to El Portal the morning after the murder, with Wheeler and the coroner, I looked the place over carefully," Cleve continued. "There were bloodstains on the rug; the furniture had been upset. After the coroner gave Mrs. Jennifer permission to have the body removed, I told Blaine the library should be locked up and everything kept as it was until we could get someone up from Reno to look for fingerprints. I knew the Reno police would cooperate. Mrs. Jennifer protested. She begged Wheeler to permit her to have the room cleaned and burn the rug. She said she couldn't live in the house, knowing that bloodstained rug was on the floor. He gave in to her."

It verified Rainbow's conclusions regarding the district attorney. For reasons of his own he didn't want

to have the rift widened between the sheriff and Wheeler at present.

"I can understand how she felt," he said. "Some good prints would be very valuable to us. But you don't always find them, Cleve. I suppose Wheeler realized that if Mrs. Jennifer had any reason to believe there were damaging fingerprints in the library she had had ample time to erase them before you got there."

"I appreciate all that." Baker buttered a piece of bread carefully. "But I can't help feeling that he tossed away a possible chance of getting something. Of course, I don't expect you boys to take sides between us. There was a little thing I noticed that morning that still puzzles me. I haven't mentioned it to anyone. It hadn't rained around here in ten days, and yet there were little hunks of mud on the rugs, both in the library and the living room. I even found traces of mud in the dining room. With all the help they have there, the place is kept spotless, so I figure the mud was tracked in during the night. When I went back to El Portal at noon, the stuff had been cleaned up." His glance ran from Rip to Grumpy. "What do you make of it?"

"Two or three things," Rip said, telling himself that Cleve Baker was going to prove a very valuable asset. "For one thing, it would indicate that the man who tracked in the mud moved rather freely about the house. Wheeler told us a couple of the French windows were unlatched. Do you know which one was used to gain entrance to the house?"

"No. A window was unhooked in the dining room, and another in the big front room. The library windows were all locked."

RAINBOW handed him a pencil and asked him to draw a floor plan of the three rooms. The living room extended across the front of the main wing; the library and dining room were behind it, separated by the wide main hall.

"That sheds some light on it," Rip declared, after studying the plan for a few moments. "I think we can take it for granted that the visitor left the house as soon after the murder as he could, and that he left by the same way he entered."

"What's yore point?" Grumpy asked.

"That he didn't go directly to the library. If he used the front window, he could have reached the library without entering the dining room, and vice versa. It makes me wonder if you didn't hit the nail on the head when you said the crime was not premeditated. When you go into a house to commit a murder, you don't wander all over the place, not if you know where to find your man."

"There was a light in the library," Cleve told him. "It was still burning when we got there. The curtains were only partly drawn. It was easy to look in from the veranda."

"If that's the case, then there was nothin' to my idea that Henry knew he was goin' to have a visitor, and they fought about somethin' before he was killed," the little man volunteered. He scratched his head thoughtfully. "I suppose he heard this fella movin' around in the other rooms and started to investigate."

"But if that bird wasn't there to kill Mr. Jennifer, what was he doing in the house?" Baker asked. "What was he after? It wasn't money; Mr. Jennifer's wallet was in his pocket, and no attempt had been made to open the safe."

"Maybe that's the real puzzle," said Rainbow. "Let's get back to those clods of mud. Was there any rain near Star City that night?"

"It stormed a little in the Rose Creek Mountains early that evening. It wasn't much of a shower. It moved south toward Reno instead of coming this way." Cleve handed his meal ticket to the waitress to be punched. "Unless this unknown gent accidentally stepped into an irrigation ditch, he must have come a long way to have mud on his boots. I guess I'll have to run along. I'll see about the broncs this afternoon. You can keep them in my barn. I want you to make yourselves at home around the office."

The partners thanked him and went back to the hotel.

"This boy Baker is quite a lad," Grumpy observed.

"He can be trusted," Rip said. "If he hadn't discussed the possibility of finding fingerprints with Wheeler, I wouldn't attach very much importance to the permission given Mrs. Jennifer to tear up the room. Since it was mentioned, I'm sure he was deliberately covering up for her." Grumpy shrugged.

"If anythin' is said about it now, Wheeler will tell you he had no print man, and no assurance he could git one in a hurry. The best thing we can do is to forget it."

The tall man nodded. "I agree with you on that. But there were traces of mud in the house. We don't have to read too much into it at this time, but it may prove to be a very important bit of evidence."

CHAPTER V

Rainbow Asks Some Questions

THEY found a couple vacant chairs on the hotel porch. Blaine Wheeler drove past a few minutes after they sat down. He nodded.

"His friendliness doesn't fool me," Grumpy muttered. "I reckon he hates our guts for steppin' into this. If it had been left to him, we'd still be back in Wyomin'." The little man chuckled. "Milo Gosline better never come to him for a favor!"

Rainbow smiled. "We've got to get along with Wheeler for the present. Instead of sitting around here, let us walk down to the church now. I want to look the crowd over as it files in."

The church stood off the main street a block on what, beyond the town limits, became the Furnace Creek road. Even before they reached it they could see that the funeral of Henry Jennifer was to be notable in several ways. Most of the stores had signs on their doors announcing they were closing for an hour. Along the main street and the one leading to the church, rigs of every kind were already rubbing wheels at the hitch racks. Among those who had driven in were some who had come a great distance. More than one of them had felt Henry Jennifer's iron heel in the dim past, but death seemed to have nullified that. Cowboys had been riding into town in twos and threes since morning to attend the services. Some of them had once worked for old Slick-ear; to the majority, he had never been more than just a name, a symbol of the power and wealth one of their calling had attained. Others would soon forget him, as they had Len Gordon, who had got rich out of the Jennifer and Gordon Cattle Company but who had always been a banker rather than a cowman; but these angular, hard-riding, underpaid men would keep old Slick-ear's memory green.

The day had turned unseasonably warm for late May, and when the partners reached the church they found that groups of the men and women, who had arrived early, had moved out under the trees that flanked both sides of the building. The newsmen were there, looking hot and bored.

"The body was brought into town about an hour ago and is resting in Swanson's funeral parlors," one of them told Rip. "The members of the immediate family and close friends are to meet there and proceed to the church together. The original plan was for them to meet at El Portal and come in from there. Bill and Ted Jennifer wouldn't have it; they said they couldn't be dragged into the place."

Rainbow refused to comment. A few minutes later, someone said, "They're coming!" It was the signal for the crowd to move into the church.

"We'll wait out here," the tall man told the little one. "Here's Cleve!"

The sheriff came up to them, looking very sedate in his black suit and bow tie.

"Miss Eliza Price, the regular soloist, has had her nose put out of joint," he informed them. "She tells me Chet Harvey, the singing cow-

boy, is going to sing 'Home on the Range' at Mrs. Jennifer's request." Cleve shook his head skeptically. "I don't believe Mr. Jennifer would approve; he didn't have any use for singing cowboys. He told me once they were the laziest men on the range."

WHEN the procession arrived, the commissioners, Blaine Wheeler and other county dignitaries, were the first to come up the walk. They arranged themselves on the church steps to form an aisle through which Rebecca Jennifer passed on the arm of Kurt Von Roehm. Just behind them came Bill and Ted Jennifer, closely followed by Rebecca's California friends and a number of the people from Reno who had come up on the train that morning. The servants brought up the rear.

"Martin didn't come," said Baker. "I didn't figure he would. Right or wrong, you've got to respect him for his convictions."

Rainbow's attention was fixed on Rebecca. Though she was heavily veiled, it could not conceal the fact that she was a strikingly handsome woman. It was a quality that had nothing to do with mere prettiness. The black she was wearing accentuated the paleness of her face and the geranium redness of her lips. It could have been an effect wholly achieved by make-up. Whatever it was, it was arresting. She glanced at Rip once, and he had the feeling that her dark eyes were looking through him.

In the several minutes it took for her and Von Roehm to come up the walk and enter the church, no word passed between them. Though he continued to watch them during the services, Rainbow was certain they did not speak to each other more than once, and then for only a word. Somehow, the feeling that the solemnity of the occasion was in no way responsible for their restraint and aloofness took possession of him. It made him wonder if they hadn't quarrelled and were only permitting themselves to be seen together here in order to create the impression that their relations were as cordial as ever.

It was so warm in the church that Rebecca raised her veil for a few minutes. Her tense face, with its strong, determined mouth, held something that, in some obscure way, struck him as definitely sinister. Mrs Atlee, the housekeeper, and the servants were seated across the aisle from her. He was aware that Mrs. Atlee, a sharp-featured woman, with thin, nervous lips, in the indefinite forties, was watching Rebecca as intently as he. Laura, the maid, and the other servants, except for Gar Chang, the stolid-faced Chinese cook, followed the services intently, with visible signs of grief for the dead master and the hope that he had remembered them in making his bequests.

"Let's slip outside," Rainbow whispered to the little one. "I've got something to say to you."

They found a place along the white picket fence where they could speak freely.

"Grump, I've been watching Mrs. Jennifer and Von Roehm. I believe they're here together only for appearance's sake. I think they've had a quarrel. They act strained."

"You'd expect that, wouldn't you? The circumstances ain't exactly hilarious."

"It goes beyond that. Tell me this: who unsold Mr. Jennifer on this oil well proposition?"

"It could have been his wife, or he could have changed his mind on his own account. One guess is as good as another."

"All right, I'll try it another way," Rip declared with a touch of impatience. "From the record, we're safe in believing that whatever Mrs. Jennifer wanted from her husband, she got. If she had wanted Von Roehm to have the forty thousand for his oil well, I believe he'd have had it. I'm convinced she didn't want him to have it."

"But why, Rip? It couldn't have been because she figgered it was throwin' the money away. She ain't been that careful about the old man's dough."

"I believe she took the stand she did because she either is—or was—in love with Von Roehm. I think that's why he came to Nevada in the first place. I also believe if we check on the frequent trips she has made to San Francisco we'll find it was for the express purpose of meeting him."

GRUMPY shook his head doggedly. "It don't make sense to me! I don't doubt but what she and that young fella was more'n friends; he's young and good-lookin', jest the kind of a man she'd go for. But that seems to me to be the best reason in the world for thinkin' she wanted him to have the money!"

"No," Rip said flatly. "She was satisfied to go on as they were; she didn't want anything to happen to their pleasant relation. She was afraid the forty thousand would be lost and that Mr. Jennifer would hold it against Von Roehm and be suspicious of her part in it."

"That's an interestin' theory, but you ain't got nothin' to back it up but yore deductions! We know Von Roehm's got an air-tight alibi—"

"His alibi doesn't prove he didn't hire somebody to do the job—Joe Gartiez, for instance. For reasons better known to her than to us, Mrs. Jennifer is sure Von Roehm is in danger, and no matter what's come up between them, she knows she's got to stick with him or become involved herself."

"Good Josephine!" the little one scoffed. "That's paralyin' an ant-hill into a mountain! Do you mean to tell me that on the little we've got so far yo're ready to step up and say yo're convinced that Von Roehm is responsible for the old man's death?"

"I'm not talking about what I believe!" Rip snapped. "I'm trying to get into Rebecca Jennifer's mind and size this thing up the way she's doing. Whether Kurt Von Roehm killed Mr. Jennifer or not, she thinks he did. If you argued with me the rest of the afternoon you couldn't knock that out of my head!"

"I'll reserve my opinion," Grumpy grumbled. A horseman was riding into town from the east. He passed the church a few moments later, glancing neither to right nor left, and giving no sign he was aware that a funeral service was being conducted within. The little one's eyes widened.

"That's Martin!" he muttered. "That's pourin' it on a little, ridin' by here jest now!"

"I imagine he's got business in town or you wouldn't be seeing him," said Rainbow. "Suppose we drift back to the hotel. If we run into Martin Jennifer, we'll have a talk with him."

When they reached the hotel, they went up to their room without stopping at the desk. They found the unlocked door standing ajar. Grumpy eyed it suspiciously.

"Funny," he muttered. "The maid must have left it open."

He pushed it back the rest of the way and was startled to find a man seated comfortably in a chair at the window.

"Come in!" the unexpected guest invited. "I told the clerk I'd wait up here for you instead of hanging around in the lobby. I want to have a talk with you. I'm Martin Jennifer."

"I know you are," Rainbow said thinly. "What's your excuse for busting in on us like this?"

Martin Jennifer chuckled as he saw him glancing about the room. "You needn't worry about your papers, if you've got any," he observed. "I haven't done any snooping. I just felt that the fewer people who knew about this meeting, the better it might be for all parties concerned. I don't know what Wheeler told you about me, or what you may have heard from other directions. It doesn't interest me very much. I hated the old man alive, and I hate him just as much dead! But I didn't kill him! I've had twenty-five years in which to do it, if that had been what I wanted. I could have cut him down when he was still young enough to have had something to live for; I wouldn't have waited till he got to be just a soft-headed monkey

on a stick for a smart, double-crossing dame like this Rebecca!"

HE admitted readily that he and his foreman had left Star City late enough on the fatal night to have been within half a mile of El Portal at the approximate time of the murder. He claimed they had encountered no one on the road, nor seen anything to arouse their suspicions.

"Wheeler's ohs and buts don't fool me!" he burst out wrathfully. "I know he believes I committed this murder. Good Lord! Even a half-wit, if he wanted to kill a man, wouldn't show up in town on the night he planned to commit the crime, hang around all evening and think he could do the job on his way home and not be found guilty! I can tell you I'm smarter than that!"

"I'm sure of it," said Rip.

"And another thing! Bill and Ted will lie themselves black in the face to pin this on me!"

"Yo're wrong, Martin," Grumpy spoke up. "We've talked with them, and they made no accusations. They're under as much, or more, suspicion than you are. But there ain't a lick of evidence against any of you."

"That's right," Rainbow confirmed. "If you boys will bury the hatchet for a while and quit thinking about yourselves, you might be able to give us some help. As a matter of fact, you didn't ride into town today to tell us you're innocent. You know something, don't you?"

Though Martin did not answer at once, his hostility began to subside. He shook his head, as though beating off some unpleasant memory. "I won't line up with Bill and Ted, I guarantee you! But if I can be of any use to you, I'll do what I can. I can't tell you anything about what went on at El Portal, but two days before the old devil was killed, I saw this Rebecca woman riding a big blue roan on the Furnace Creek road. My house sets back so far that you ordinarily don't see who's passing. But I happened to be down below and I saw her. Frank Ruby's ranch is the only place below me. Beyond him, you've got open desert. I got curious, and I followed her. I'd never seen her around there before, and I wondered what her business was with Frank. But she didn't go to his house. When she was a mile this side of it, she turns up the slope and rides into the scrub timber. There was someone waiting there to meet her. I haven't any idea who it was. After about twenty minutes, she comes down the slope and rides back across the valley."

Rainbow chose to appear only mildly interested. "It couldn't have been Ruby she met, eh?"

"I hardly believe so. She didn't know I was watching. If she'd wanted to see Frank, she'd have gone right to the house, wouldn't she?"

Grumpy caught Rip's eye before he said: "You consider this might be important, Martin. What's yore idea about it?"

"Why, I think the old man's murder was arranged right there and then! Why else would that wench have been sneaking up into the hills?"

"Have you mentioned this to Ruby?" Rip asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

The question took Martin by surprise. After a moment's floundering, he said: "Frank Ruby is a tough customer; if he knew I had been spying on his range, it wouldn't set well with him."

"I can supply a better reason," Rainbow returned. "You didn't say anything to him because you're sure it was either he, or one of his crew, that Mrs. Jennifer met."

"No!" was the angry answer. "I told you I didn't have any idea who it was! That meeting coulr have been held on my range as easy as on his, and I needn't have known anything about it. I'm not walking wide of Ruby, or anyone else, but I'm not asking for trouble till I get hold of something definite. I figured I'd keep my eyes open and see what was going on. When I learned that you

men were here, I decided to tell you what I'd seen and keep out of it myself."

"What about Ruby's crew?" Grumpy asked. "You acquainted with 'em?"

"Only by sight. He never keeps a man long. They're all bronc busters, and when they get a few dollars, they drift.... Will you look into what I told you?"

"We'll look into it," Rip replied. "In the meantime, I'd advise you to go back to your ranch and keep your mouth shut. If we want to get in touch with you, we know where to find you."

WITH Martin Jennifer's going, a profound silence settled on the partners as they endeavored to assay his story at its true value.

"Mrs. Jennifer knows she's an outsider here," Rip said, after several minutes of mulling it over. "I believe she is fully aware that when she goes riding she is resented and envied by every woman she meets, if not for her smart clothes and good looks, then for the luxury with which she has surrounded herself. I think she's alive equally to the fact that she is the subject of even greater interest where the men are concerned; that they watch her like hawks, so they can have something to talk about in the saloons. That being the case, she must have considered her errand extremely urgent to have arranged that rendezvous."

The little one nodded in full agreement. "She certainly must have known if she was seen it would be remembered. ....Who was she meetin', Rip?"

"One of three men—Ruby, Joe Gartiez, or Von Roehm. We know two of them were in that neighborhood. Von Roehm could have ridden in from his camp on the desert and been there. Instead of questioning Mrs. Jennifer tomorrow, we'll let that go for a day or two and pull out of town about daylight. I don't know what we'll find in those hills, but if we don't accomplish anything else we'll have a talk with Frank Ruby."

CHAPTER VI

Strange Trails

THE partners got their first glimpse of El Portal early the next morning. Grumpy gazed at it with mingled amazement and contempt.

"Good Josephine!" he rapped. "The idea of Henry Jennifer rattlin' around in a place like that! He musta been crazy ever to have built it! Reckon Martin was right; when the old fool hung up his guns to gather dust, he musta hung up his brains with 'em!"

"He had the money," said Rip; "that's all was necessary."

"Yeh, money! Money he ground out of the hides of better men than him! I've seen some of his cow camps! You wouldn't ask a dog to live in 'em!"

Rainbow let it go at that as he focused his attention on the big, rambling house that commanded the entrance to Blue Valley, the major part of which had been Jennifer and Gordon range for forty years. The house was built in the Spanish style, with two wings that, presumably, formed the sides of a hidden patio. Trees and shrubs had been set out, but they were still so small that the immense structure of stucco and native stone seemed to stand naked on the low, rounded hill that rose like an island out of a sea of sage-brush flats that stretched away to the Rose Creek foothills, to the east.

Beyond El Portal a line of willows traced a winding course across Blue Valley. Rip properly supposed it marked the course of Rose Creek and indicated where the Wagon Wheel house could be found.

"The house is new and ugly, but it's nicely situated," he remarked, as they rode on. "You should be able to see quite a slice of Nevada from there."

The Furnace Creek road continued to strike across the valley and reach toward the first fold of hills. Grumpy pulled up when they were several miles east of El Portal.

"We've got a considerable piece to go yet before we reach that range," he declared. "The other night Opal Charlie told us he was only a couple miles east of the house when he saw those two men. We're a good two miles this side of it already and I don't see no slope he could have camped on, less it's this little hogback here."

Rip glanced at the low ridge, off to their right. It was not over forty feet high at any point. It ran away to the south for almost a mile before it pinched out.

"This might have been the very spot," he said. "There must be a spring just above that big patch of mountain mahogany; it looks pretty green."

If there was water here there was more reason than ever to believe that this was where Charlie had bedded down. Rainbow turned off the road to investigate. In a few minutes, he signalled to Grumpy that he found a spring. A glance was enough to tell them the spot was often used as a camping place. The ashes of old fires and the holes made by picket pins proved it.

"This must be where he holed up that night," the little one reasoned aloud. "It checks with what we know about the weather. He didn't say anythin' about it rainin'. Cleve tells us none fell here, but it stormed in the mountains."

"That seems to pin it down," said Rainbow. "When Charlie got here, he was still about eight miles from Star City. Being on foot, he well might have decided he'd lay out here for the night. I suppose he was up at dawn and got in town early to catch the morning train for Reno."

"That's about the only way he could have hit Reno without knowing what had happened at El Portal. He claimed the first he heard of it was in the saloons along the Row."

The little man studied the ground around the springs, trying to decide on the exact spot where Opal Charlie had spread his blankets. He finally got down from his saddle and stretched out on the grass.

"Jest what I thought," he announced; "considerable pitch to the ground. A man would naturally go to sleep with his head higher than his feet, so when old Charlie sat up and saw those two gents, he was lookin' down the slope, toward the west."

RIP nodded. "It would seem so to me. He said they were about forty yards away. That's about the distance to the foot of the ridge. The two men had evidently turned off the road as we did and were swinging around this rise."

"Yeh." Grumpy bent down over the pool and helped himself to a drink. He got up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I'd like to have you explain to me what them fellas was doin', turnin' in here that way. We're goin' ahead on the theory that they'd jest killed a man and was makin' a run for it. Swingin' around this hogback ain't no shortcut to the Rose Creek Mountains, or out into the desert beyond. That's the direction Ruby, Gartiez and Von Roehm would have been headin'. If you want to include Martin Jennifer, he'd have been movin' that way, too."

"There's only one answer I can give you," the tall man replied. "I think they turned in because there was someone waiting here to meet them. It isn't likely they came in very far before they met this third party. I believe they went over the ridge then and cut back to the road. Suppose we try that ourselves."

They went down to the bottom of the slope and followed it for three hundred yards. Grumpy, a good tracker, led the way. He held up his hand suddenly and called a halt.

"Hoss sign here," he declared. "Two or three animals."

"How old?" Rip asked.

"Four, five days. The wind's rubbed off the sharp edges of the tracks and they're beginnin' to fill up." The little man leaned low in his saddle and began to move out into the sage. "Set of tracks goin' this way," he announced. "Guess the others must go up the ridge, as you figgered."

Without great difficulty they picked up the trail of two horses that crossed the ridge and then swung back into the Furnace Creek road.

"We can be sure of our facts up to here," Rainbow declared confidently. "We know two men went to El Portal that night. One of them undoubtedly remained outside on guard; the other went in and killed Mr. Jennifer. They rode in this direction, then; met someone along that ridge and then continued on east into the hills. Whoever made those tracks that strike back across the valley certainly kept well out on the flats and gave El Portal a wide berth. Let's turn around and see if we can follow them."

They picked up the dim trail and followed it for over a mile, only to have it fade out completely on a field of flinty hardpan.

"We don't seem able to git a break that'll stand up for us!" the little man growled in his disappointment. "I figger the person who made this trail was top dog in this killin'. No two men, fresh from a murder, are pullin' up to palaver with anyone less than the party who hired 'em."

"That's my idea of it," said Rip.

IN the course of another hour, they left the valley behind them. Every twist and turn of the road carried them higher into the hills. They met no one. Gradually, the country began to change; the graze looked better, and the bunches of cattle they saw graded up well to their experienced eyes. They passed a gate, decorated with the Double Diamond mark, burned deep with a hot branding iron, and knew this was Martin Jennifer's range. They looked for the house. Grumpy was the first to locate it. Only the roof was visible from the road.

"It must have been along here that he saw Mrs. Jennifer passin'," he said. "It's a purty lonely road for a woman." He eyed the tall buckbrush that grew close to the road with lingering suspicion. "It could be a mighty convenient place to knock us off, if somebody happens to be inclined that way."

Rainbow jerked a grim nod. "I've been thinking that for the past ten minutes. Keep your eyes open."

With sharpened alertness, they went on, but only the raucous chattering of the magpies and the whistling of mountain quail broke the stillness of the clear blue and white morning. When they had put another mile behind them, they found a small stream flowing across the road. It was Furnace Creek, so named because its precious waters were destined to be wasted in the parched sands of the Black Rock Desert. A short distance beyond the crossing, a gentle, grass-covered slope swelled up to a tangle of stunted cedars and patches of aspens. Rainbow trained his binoculars on the trees.

"This is evidently the spot we're looking for," he said. "Let's get up there. We may find a trail. If we don't, we'll move through that scrub timber until we get a glimpse of Ruby's place. I want to give it a careful going over."

They found old horse tracks among the trees. Grumpy wasted very little time on them.

"Some of them are only a day or two old," he proclaimed. "Ruby's riders have evidently been through here roundin' up stock."

They reconnoitered along the crest of the slope for some distance without discovering any sign of a trail coming in from the direction of the desert.

"That seems to knock the bottom out of my idea that Von Roehm has been in the habit of coming through here on his way in from his camp," Rainbow observed, not trying to hide his disappointment. "I was pretty sure of it; it seemed to explain why Mrs. Jennifer had picked out this spot to meet him."

"You may be right about it at that," the little one argued. "Von Roehm may have been stayin' north of the crick till he reached the road. From the crossin', it's only a short ride up here. Suppose we forgit about Ruby for an hour or two and cut straight through these hills till

we see where this Furnace Crick runs out into the desert. We can work back along it, then. Mebbe we'll pick up his trail."

The tall man was agreeable to this plan. Without exposing themselves unduly, they moved to the east for several miles and failed to catch so much as a distant glimpse of any riders. Rip used his glasses repeatly.

"The feelin' must be purty strong in you that we're bein' watched, or you wouldn't be that careful," Grumpy remarked.

Rip shrugged. "Maybe I am a little spooky about it. We've come a long way not to have seen someone. When we get a little further up this mountain, we ought to be high enough to get our bearings and have a good look at the country."

The going was bad for the horses, but they were sure-footed broncs, and with almost human patience they picked their way up to a narrow bench just below the rimrock. From that point of vantage the partners could see Furnace Creek working down out of the mountains, a mile to the north; ahead of them, the alkali flats and sandy reaches of the Black Rock stretched away to the horizon. They took turns studying the country with the binoculars.

"I DON'T know how long Von Roehm stays at his camp, or just where it's located," said Rip, "but he certainly can't have any water there, except what he carries out with him. I'd say it makes it almost certain that he comes and goes by way of Furnace Creek. I didn't think we'd got this far below it."

"Swings north some I reckon," the little one answered. "Won't take us long to git over there."

They found a well defined trail on the north bank of the creek, and were further rewarded by the discovery of the spot where Von Roehm got his water. Several posts had been driven into the ground and a brush shelter erected over them. There, suspended from a wire that connected one post with the other, hung two empty canteens and a pair of canvas water-bags. The partners followed the trail far enough to be sure it stayed close to the creek all the way back to the road. When they turned toward Frank Ruby's horse ranch, there was no doubt in their minds but what Kurt Von Roehm was the man Rebecca had met.

"But there could have been others there, too," Grumpy muttered thoughtfully. "That could have been a three or four-way talk."

"No," Rip contradicted flatly. "She met Von Roehm and no one else. If what she had to say concerned a third or fourth party, he relayed her message to them. Whether she's innocent or guilty, I don't believe she ever had any personal contact with men like Gartiez. Von Roehm would have seen to that."

A long, narrow mountain meadow opened ahead of them. Instead of cutting across, they circled around it and were just riding into the trees at the far end when a horseman appeared on the skyline. He gave the meadow a hasty scrutiny and caught the movement of the branches where the partners had just passed. A glimpse was enough for him, and he wheeled his bronc and dropped back out of sight.

Unaware that they had been seen, Rip and the little one continued on through the scrub timber, altering their course only to avoid the brush-choked ravines and the impassable granite reefs. The timber thinned out suddenly, and they saw Ruby's house below them. It was just a weatherbeaten shack, flanked by a barn with a sagging rdige-pole and half a dozen pole corrals. Rip trained his glasses on the yard. There was no one in sight.

"It's noon," Grumpy told him. "They're inside, eatin'."

The correctness of his observation was proven a minute or two later when four men emerged from the kitchen door. The tall man studied them carefully.

"Joe Gartiez isn't one of them," he muttered.

"Didn't expect he would be," was the little man's tart rejoinder. "If there's grub down there, let's ride in;

mebbe we'll be lucky enough to be asked to pull up a chair."

"That's not my idea of the sort of reception we'll get. Don't be surprised if you find a gun being shoved into your ribs."

With their attention focused on the men in the yard, they began moving down the draw. They had gone only a few yards when they reached the end of the rock wall at their right. There, screened from sight until they were right on top of him, waited the horseman who had appeared briefly on the ridge above the meadow.

"Pull up!" was his sharp summons, its hostility emphasized by the rifle that rested across his saddle bow. "I been watchin' you birds for a couple hours! What the hell are you snoopin' around here for? You want to start talkin' and talk fast!"

CHAPTER VII

Straws in the Wind

THE partners were caught flat-footed for a moment. To ride into this sort of jackpot like a pair of inexperienced tenderfeet was gall and wormwood to them. But they did not lose their heads. Unnoticed, Grumpy jabbed his off-side spur into the belly of his bronc. The startled animal reared up on its hind legs and pawed the air, acting very much as though the unexpected appearance of the man with the rifle had frightened it. The little one helped to convey the illusion by talking reassuringly to the horse. When he finally quieted it, he was on one side of the stranger and Rip on the other. It was an old trick of theirs and one that was usually effective.

"Open up!" the waiting horseman snapped, fingering his gun. "I ain't waitin' much longer!"

"We're looking for Frank Ruby," Rainbow told him, realizing its lameness as an excuse. "Do you ride for him?"

"Never mind who I am!" was the sullen answer. "If you wanted to see Frank, why didn't you go to the house?"

"'Cause we didn't have a mind to!" Grumpy flared back before Rainbow could tell the man who they were. "What's wrong with havin' a look at this country? Is there somethin' around here yo're tryin' to hide?"

The man's beady, button eyes glittered forbiddingly. His aquiline nose and the copperish tint of his skin hinted that there was a strong French-Indian strain in him. The partners had seen his kind a thousand times—tough, wiry men in faded overalls and battered Stetson; coarse grained and dangerous when they had a gun in their fist.

"Get movin'!" he ordered now, jerking his head in the direction of the house. "If you gents have got anythin' to say to Frank, you're goin' to get a chance to spill it!"

"Before you get serious," said Rip, "take a look at this." He produced the deputy sheriff's badge Wheeler had given him. "Does it tell you anything?"

"Yeh, plenty!" Actually, it only confirmed the man's suspicion regarding their identity. His eyes remained unreadable, but he hedged at once. "Why didn't you say who you were when I stopped you?"

"We won't bother about that," Rainbow said thinly. "Just put that rifle back in the boot and ride in with us. I imagine Ruby is going to be a little annoyed with you when he hears how you stuck us up. It could lead to some unpleasant questions."

The man's beady eyes remained unreadable, but he understood Rip perfectly. After a moment's hesitation, he slipped his rifle into the saddle boot. "When you're runnin' a couple hundred horses on unfenced range, you've got a right to know who's around," was his crafty excuse.

When he and the partners rode into the yard, the men who had been in to dinner were perched on a corral gate. They pretended to go on talking and their dark, enigmatic faces betrayed no sign of interest. Rainbow and Grumpy were not fooled. A tall, red-haired man came

out of the house. He had the yellow look of a consumptive. His face was emaciated and there were deep hollows under the cheekbones.

"Lunger," Grumpy muttered under his breath. Rip nodded.

"Who's this, Frenchy?" the red-haired man asked.

"The two detectives the county's brought in on the Jennifer business. I been tryin' to catch up with 'em for a couple hours. I didn't know who they was till a few minutes ago."

Ruby listened to his account of what had happened and then turned to the partners. His eyes were wary and unfathomable. He said: "I don't know what you're after around here; I never had any trouble with Henry Jennifer. I manage to make a living and don't ask no favors of anybody."

"A LITTLE information is all we want from you," Rip returned. "You've got a big stretch of wasteland almost at your front door. We were interested in seeing how easily a man could reach it if he had any reason to leave this country in a hurry. Cleve Baker tells us that's the way they usually go."

"Yeh, and one or two of my broncs usually disappear with them. That's why I've been keeping one of the boys up in the hills the past few days." Ruby was neither too friendly nor too hostile. He dismissed Frenchy with a jerk of his head. "I'm sorry Jeanette had to sneak up on you that way," he continued, as the latter rode on across the yard. "But that's the Injun in him. Will you get down?"

There was an overturned wagon box near the kitchen door. It made a comfortable seat.

"How big a crew you got?" Grumpy asked.

"Only five right now," Ruby answered. "These bronc busters don't stay with a man long. Jeanette's been here less than a year and he's my oldest hand."

"Who are the others?" Rainbow queried.

"Plumas Johnson, Chip Silvers, Ferd Taney, Buck Lapeer." Ruby counted them off on his fingers. A fit of coughing wracked the man. He spat on the ground and scraped dust over the spot with his boot. "Do you want to question them?"

"I don't believe so," said Rip.

"That's up to you, Ripley. I don't believe they know anything that would interest you. To the best of my knowledge they haven't been off the place since Gartiez and Rapp left me."

He tossed the names of the two men into the conversation with such carelessness as to suggest to the partners that he either knew exactly why they were there and saw some advantage for himself in beating them to the punch, or that he was so confident of being able to prove his own innocence that he was deliberately establishing his connection with Gartiez and Rapp. Instead of asking what he believed were the expected questions about the two men, Rainbow countered with a little surprise of his own.

"You speak about none of your crew being away from the ranch," he said. "What about yourself? Where were you on the night Mr. Jennifer was murdered?"

"Why, I was right here." Ruby's frosty eyes did not lose their cold glitter. "If there's any question about it, ask the boys—"

"That won't be necessary." Rip's tone was deceivingly mild. 'It stormed up here in the hills that night. Not a drop of rain fell around Star City or El Portal. And yet, the killer—or killers—tracked mud into the house. How would you explain that, Frank?"

Ruby lost some of his composure. "It ain't up to me to explain who killed that old pirate," he protested. "That's your job."

"Shore," Grumpy agreed. "We're jest askin' yore opinion. We've looked at it every which way and we git only one answer. If there was mud up here that night, and none in the valley, wouldn't you say this was where it came from?"

"So what?" Ruby demanded after another spell of coughing. "There's a

dozen ranches in the Rose Creek range."

"To say nothing of the fact that a man could slip in off the Black Rock," Rainbow put in. He watched Frank Ruby with guileless gray eyes and saw him take the bait.

"I HADN'T thought of that, Ripley. Maybe you've got something there." He stared off into space for a moment, and though his cavernous face was expressionless, Rainbow knew he was turning something over in his mind. "It ain't up to me to say anything," he went on. "But you can find some things out for yourselves. There's a young fellow by the name of Von Roehm who's looking for oil out on the desert. Maybe he could tell you something. He's been friendly with Jennifer and his wife."

"Wheeler introduced us to him yesterday." This eagerness to cast suspicion on Von Roehm forced Rip to conclude that the two men were not partners in the crime. It even cast some doubt on his rather deep-seated conviction that the German was the key figure in the case. To offset this, he found himself more interested than ever in Frank Ruby. He turned the conversation once more. "You've been around this part of Nevada a long time, Frank. I suppose you're acquainted with an old desert character who calls himself Opal Charlie."

Ruby seemed to take the question in stride. "I used to know him. I haven't seen him in a couple years. What makes you ask?"

"He was in the neighborhood on the night of the murder. Camped on that little hogback east of the Jennifer place. Two men turned in there just after midnight and met a third party. The old man saw them. He had a pretty good look at one. A match was struck to light a cigarette."

"Well, that ought to make your job purty easy," the red-haired man remarked without the faintest sign of anxiety. "If old Charlie can identify one of those gents for you, it ought to open up things."

His cocksureness convinced the partners that he knew the old man was dead. Grumpy eyed him with undisguised hostility. "Witnesses often disappear, Ruby. Sometimes they git pushed under freight trains."

Ruby surprised them with a sepulchral laugh. "I figgered you'd smoke yourselves out. I know as well as you do that Opal Charlie was run over in Reno night before last. I read about it in the paper. I understood it was an accident. Why were you stalling with me about it?"

"Because we're interested in the two men who put him out of the way," Rainbow said bluntly. "I mean Joe Gartiez and Pete Rapp."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Ruby whipped out fiercely. "I call that good, gumshoeing on me because that pair used to work here!" All his restraint seemed to vanish. He leaped to his feet, and his excitement brought on another fit of coughing that held him speechless for a minute. "They asked for their time ten days ago. I ain't seen nor heard nothing of 'em since: I ain't been in Reno. If they got in a jam there, I don't know nothing about it! I suppose when you smart Alecks found out that Gartiez had just left the pen, you figgered I must be a blackleg or I wouldn't have given him a job!"

Out of the corner of his eye Grumpy saw that the five men loitering at the corral gate had come to attention, their faces dark and inscrutable. Rainbow was not unaware of them.

"When Gartiez left Carson, he headed directly for your ranch, Ruby. How did he know you had a job for him?"

"Because he wrote me a couple months ago that he was coming out and asked me to give him a break. He always knew his business with horses, so I told him I'd make a place for him. Was there anything wrong in that? He'd done his time."

"No one could find fault with that," said Rip. "But he only stays with you a couple weeks. Did he tell you why he was leaving?"

"Yeh. He and Pete had the same

idea; they had to get in on that gold excitement down at Tonopah. Anything they did after they rode through that gate is their own business; I ain't even interested in hearing about it!"

"Suppose we let it go at that for the present," the tall man suggested. "if anything comes up in the future, we'll look you up."

"Okay!" Ruby muttered. "But the next time you better use the road!"

THE partners stepped into their saddles and were about to ride out of the yard when a horseman jogged through the gate. He had a well-laden pack animal on a short lead rope.

"Von Roehm!" Grumpy said to Rainbow.

"Yeh! Let's have a word with him." He glanced at Ruby. "Do you mind?"

"Why should I? I keep a couple horses for him; that's the only business he has with me."

Kurt raised his hand to them as he rode up.

"This is a surprise," he said. "I hadn't expected to find you up here." His manner was friendly. But he was quick to sense that there had been some unpleasantness between the partners and Ruby. A thought clouded his blue eyes. "Were you looking for me?"

"No, just sizing up the country and having a little talk with Frank," Rip told him. "He tells us he keeps a couple horses for you."

"Yes, it is quite a convenience." Von Roehm turned to Ruby. "Frank, will you have one of the boys toss the water pack on the sorrel? I got a late start today and I want to be moving along as quickly as I can. I stopped in at the post office for your mail. Three newspapers seemed to be all they had for you."

Obviously, if yesterday's newspapers were just arriving at the ranch Ruby could not have read anything about Opal Charlie's death. The man's sunken eyes narrowed to slits as he reached out for the papers. In his anxiety to bundle them up and get them out of sight, one fell to the ground. Before he could pick it up, the partners read the streamer headline: TRAIN KILLS OPAL CHARLIE.

Rainbow and Grumpy remained poker-faced, Ruby flicked a troubled glance at them as he straightened up. Their apparent disinterest seemed to reassure him. "Much obliged," he told Von Roehm. "I'll have Buck get up your horse." He turned abruptly and walked down to the corral.

"Water is my big problem," Kurt explained, apparently unaware of the incident. "The canteens and waterbags only last me a day or two, so I've arranged a keg on a pack saddle to help out. I wish you gentlemen would ride out to the camp with me; I'd like to show you what I've found out there."

"Some other time perhaps," said Rip. "When we were in Wheeler's office yesterday, he told us what you'd had to say and showed us the letter you turned over to him. Did you go to him because you are friends, or did you feel it was your duty to supply what information you could?"

"I had a better reason." The young German's lips thinned soberly. "I can establish the fact that I was in Reno that evening, but I'm not deceiving myself; I know I'm still the perfect suspect. If I were to be convicted of the murder, I don't believe Blaine would be too concerned about whether I was guilty or not."

Though it was no less than what Rainbow secretly believed, he said: "You needn't worry about the wrong man being sent up for this job. I give you my word on that. But if you want to do yourself a favor, keep your eyes open; someone may be interested in leaving you holding the bag. . . We'll see you again."

He jerked a parting nod at Von Roehm, and Grumpy and he rode toward the gate.

"I don't like the idea of turnin' our backs on that bunch!" the little one growled.

"We're safe enough today," Rip answered. "It may be different the next time. Do you think Von Roehm got the hint I dropped about Ruby?"

"If he knows as much about this

killin' as I figger he does, he couldn't help gittin' it! Stir up that bronc a little! Let's git out of here!"

They reached the road without incident and soon were out of sight of the house.

"I feel better," the little one declared frankly. "Make no mistake about it, Frank Ruby knows who killed old Slick-ear! What he knows about Opal Charlie, he ddin't git out of any paper!"

"He got it direct from Gartiez or Rapp—or both. They didn't have to use the railroad or go to Star City to get here. It's a stiff ride, but a man can come across country from Reno in six, seven hours. That's evidently what they did."

"But if they came back here, where do you figger they are now?"

"I believe they're still here, holed up somewhere out on the Black Rock."

Grumpy straightened up in his saddle. "Good Josephine!" he burst out. "This thing's beginnin' to make sense to me at last! I been askin' myself why Ruby had that Injun out scoutin' through these hills. This is the answer, shore as shootin'! And Von Roehm—is this why he's luggin' extra water with him?"

"I don't know," said Rip, "but for the present that's the way we're goin' to figure it."

CHAPTER VIII

Stacked Deck—Or What?

WHEN Rainbow and Grumpy got back to Star City early that evening they found a note from Blaine Wheeler at the hotel. He had been called to Reno, he said, and would be back on the morning train.

"Too bad he ain't goin' to be gone a week or two," Grumpy declared. "It would spare us the annoyance of havin' to drop into his office for him to check up on us."

Rip felt the same way about it. "We'll make the most of the time we have," he said. "We'll see Cleve tonight and take him up to El Portal with us in the morning before the train gets in."

Star City had returned to its normal existence, and the partners found only a few people in the dining room. Of the four newspapermen, only the one who had mentioned Gartiez had remained in town. He came over to their table.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" he inquired.

"No," Rip replied. "What did you say your name is?"

"Tim Baker. I've been ordered to stick around a few days. I feel as lonesome as an orphan. Have you got any idea when Jennifer's will is going to be offered for probate?"

"No. I suppose Milo Gosline, in Reno, could tell you about that," the tall man suggested.

"He won't be back until tomorrow, they said at the bank." Bunker lit a cigarette and puffed on it contemplatively for a moment. "If a new will happens to show up, it'll shed some light on the case. It would certainly be in Mrs. Jennifer's favor—the new will, I mean."

Rainbow's respect for the man's shrewdness deepened. "Have you any reason to believe there is a new will?"

"No, it's just a hunch. I had a talk with Bill Jennifer this afternoon. He and his brother are afraid the old man may have made a later will than the one they know about. If that happens to be the case, they're all set to break it."

A smile touched Rip's gray eyes. "I'm afraid I smell a mouse, Bunker. When you brought up the subject of the will with Jennifer, you had something in your mind. Why not come through with it? We may be able to give you a break later on."

Bunker shook his head skeptically. "It's awfully sketchy; just a hunch, as I said." The waitress had brought him a cup of coffee. He stared at it thoughtfully. "I guess you know that Wheeler, the D. A., has been a rather frequent visitor at El Portal. Maybe it's all been on a social basis; I could be wrong about it. He doesn't practice privately any more, but he's still a lawyer; he could draw a will.

I know for a fact that he's been up there of late when Mrs. Jennifer wasn't around. The last time was just a couple days before Jennifer was murdered."

"Have you mentioned it to Wheeler?" Grumpy asked.

"Yeh! He shut me off before I got very far. That's what made me think there might be something to it."

"I can't get excited about it," said Rainbow. "A new will may be produced, but if there was one thing Mr. Jennifer was proud of it was the Jennifer, Gordon Cattle Company; he would have wanted it carried on intact. He knew his sons were the men to do it. I don't believe he would have done anything to take the control out of their hands."

BUT the reporter's conjecture was not easily dismissed, and as the partners left the hotel for the sheriff's office, Grumpy reverted to it.

"For Wheeler to know anythin' about a new will, important as it could be, and keep us in the dark, would be jest the kind of double-cross I'd expect us to git from him," he declared tartly. "The sooner we have a showdown with that gent, and either take complete charge of the case or git out of it, the better off we'll be."

"That may come soon enough to satisfy you," Rip remarked, with a preoccupied air. "I imagine the next twenty-four hours will present some startling developments."

They found Cleve in his office. "I figured you might be dropping in this evening," he told them. "What kind of a day did you have across the valley?"

"We saw a lot of country and got up as far as Frank Ruby's ranch," Rainbow told him. "We ran into Von Roehm as we were leaving. I've got a telegram here, Cleve, that I want you to send to the chief of police in Santa Barbara. We ought to have an answer in the morning."

"Sure," Baker agreed. He read the message. "Why the interest in Mrs. Atlee, Rip? You don't think she's involved, do you?"

"No, I just want to get a line on her so I can make her talk. The three of us will go up to El Portal as soon as the answer to this wire arrives."

The sheriff leaned back in his chair and gave him a shrewd smile. "Wheeler isn't going to like that," he said. "He called me in this noon and told me when we got ready to question Mrs. Jennifer that he would go with us."

"I think we can get along without him," Rainbow observed casually. "We were promised a free hand, and we propose to proceed on that basis."

He realized that it would be necessary to take Baker into their confidence, but he didn't believe the time for it had arrived. They didn't stay long. Cleve said he'd take the telegram down to the depot.

"Frank Ruby is a sick man," Rip remarked, as they were leaving.

"Yeh, he's going fast," Cleve answered. "Just skin and bones. He should have got out of this high altitude a long time ago. He talks about going to Arizona."

"How long's he been this way?"

"Just the last year or two."

Grumpy thought he understood what was behind Rainbow's question, and they were no sooner alone than he said: "Ruby claimed he hadn't seen Opal Charlie in a couple years. If that's true, he's changed so much that Charlie wouldn't have recognized him, not in the second it takes a match to flare up and go out on a windy night."

"It very well may have been Ruby whom he saw. At least, we don't have to rule out that possibility."

They had often found the saloons of a town a fertile field in which to pick up stray bits of information. They tried four or five this evening, but the conversation did not interest them.

"I reckon we'll call it a night," Grumpy said.

When they got upstairs at the hotel, he pulled his boots off and dragged a chair up to a window. He had picked up a discarded Reno newspaper in the lobby. He settled down with it and his pipe. His read-

ing was as methodical as everything else he did, and he digested every item of ranch and mining news. He finally tossed it aside. Rip was already in bed.

"Another big strike at Tonopah," the little man sighed. "I'd shore like to git on somethin' like that."

"Why don't you speak to Von Roehm?" Rainbow responded sleepily. "He's looking for capital. You can get in on the ground floor."

"Hunh!" Grumpy snorted disgustedly. "Nobody thought there was oil in Wyomin' till they found it!" He picked up his boots and turned out the light. "Plenty of suckers in the world, and the biggest ones are them that never took a chance!"

CLEVE BAKER found them at breakfast the next morning. Rip read the telegram Baker handed him.

"This is better than I expected," the tall man said. "If I judge Ida Atlee correctly, she doesn't intend to be any help to us. This may cause her to change her mind."

When they arrived at El Portal, it was Mrs. Atlee who admitted them. It was hardly necessary for Baker to tell her who his companions were, or why they were there.

"Mrs. Jennifer is not down yet," she told them, her tone as frigid as Rainbow expected. "You and Mr. Wheeler have questioned us so many times already, Mr. Baker, that I hoped we might be spared another visit. You can imagine that Mrs. Jennifer is in a nervous condition."

"We'll try to be as brief as we can," Rip told her. "It won't be necessary to call Mrs. Jennifer immediately; we want to examine the main rooms first. After that, we'll question the servants."

"Very well. This is the living room, as you can see. The library and dining room are down the hall."

The partners were forced to admit that Blaine Wheeler's rhapsodic description of El Portal was fully justified. The rich hangings, pictures, bric-a-brac and exquisite pieces of rare porcelain had obviously cost a fortune.

"The old man had a regular museum here," Grumpy murmured in an aside to Rainbow. The latter was examining the brass handled fire-set. He picked up the heavy, spear-headed poker.

"Cleve, was this poker in the stand when you first saw it?"

"Yes, I looked it over carefully. The curved point still had white wood ashes on it. Mrs. Atlee told me that Alfredo Salazar, the gardener and handy-man, had brought in some logs and that a fire had burned in the fireplace all evening." He turned to her for confirmation.

"That's correct," she said icily. "I've told you repeatedly that I did not find anything disturbed in here or the dining room."

"I'm sorry we have to annoy you this way," Rainbow said conciliatingly. "Unfortunately, it's necessary ....Which window was unlatched, Cleve?"

"The one in the southeast corner. You can see how easily a man could have stepped in from the veranda."

Grumpy walked over to the window, opened it and looked out. In the distance he could see the low hogback where Opal Charlie had camped. He closed the window and spoke to the housekeeper. "Did you find any ashes from the fireplace spread over the rug that mornin' ma'am?"

"No," was the definite answer.

"Then this window wasn't used, Rip. The wind was howlin' that night. It would have been impossible to open a window on this side without blowin' ashes around."

Rainbow found the point well made. At his suggestion, they moved into the dining room, where they found the furnishings and silver in keeping with the luxury of the rest of the establishment. Baker indicated the window he had found unlatched on that side of the house.

"This must have been the window that was used," he pointed out. "This was the lee side that night. There's a little balcony outside. A man could swing up and put a leg over it without any trouble."

The tall man nodded. "Nothing was disturbed in here, Mrs. Atlee?"

"Not a thing. I've checked the silver carefully. I presume," she added tartly, "that Mr. Baker and Mr. Wheeler have told you that they found several hundred dollars in Mr. Jennifer's wallet, as well as the funds in the library safe."

"Yes, they have," Rainbow answered patiently. "Suppose we have a look at the library."

THEY found it a beautifully panelled room, with red leather furniture, a massive desk, a fireplace and well-filled shelves of books, looking new and unused.

"This was Mr. Jennifer's favorite room," Mrs. Atlee volunteered, as she and Ripley walked over to the desk.

"Favorite room eh?" Grumpy muttered under his breath to Baker. "He must have felt like a pig in a china shop here. When I knew him, the only book he ever read was his bankbook!"

Rip sat down at the desk. "Cleve, just where was the body when you first saw it?"

The sheriff stepped over to a spot halfway between the desk and the door. "Right here. Do you want me to get down on the floor and show you the position it was in?"

"If you will, please."

"Honestly, is that necessary?" Mrs. Atlee demanded indignantly. "It's ghastly to go through such a performance as that!"

"You can turn your back if you care to," Rip told her. "Go ahead, Cleve."

"He was lying face down, like this," Baker said from his position on the floor. "His head was pointing toward the door."

"Was it the front of his skull that was crushed?" Grumpy asked.

"Yes. He'd been struck three or four blows. I believe any one of them would have killed him."

Rainbow turned to Mrs. Atlee. She was bristling angrily. "If you'll sit down, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Of course," she snapped. "I want to be as helpful as I can—naturally. I want the murderer brought to justice—but Mr. Baker could have told you all these things."

"Mrs. Atlee, was the library door usually closed when Mr. Jennifer was in the room?"

"Yes. Mr. Jennifer smoked a great deal. He was always afraid the cigar smoke was offensive to Mrs. Jennifer."

Grumpy's lips curled sarcastically. "I'll bet he was!" he thought. "Chances are this was the only place in the house where he dared to light a cigar!"

The floor of the library was bare.

"I understand Mrs. Jennifer had the rug destroyed," said Rainbow.

"It was burned," the housekeeper replied. "Alfredo and the stableman took care of it. I saw to it personally that the lower floor was thoroughly cleaned."

"Then you saw the mud that had been tracked in. Were you curious about it at all?"

"Mud?" she echoed incredulously. "Dust, perhaps, but hardly mud. The house is always spotless; it had not rained in days—"

"The sheriff says he found definite traces of mud in the living room, dining room and in here." Rainbow glanced at Cleve.

"That's correct," the latter spoke up. "I gathered up a few pieces."

Mrs. Atlee sat up stiffly. "I can't believe it," she protested.

Rip was silent for a moment. He looked up and asked Baker to step outside and make sure they were not interrupted. He addressed himself to Mrs. Atlee again.

"Mrs. Atlee, you've been with Mrs. Jennifer for seven years. You were with her when she was Mrs. Ames, and later, Mrs. Kelland. Is that correct?"

"Well, I have been with Mrs. Jennifer a long time," was the tart admission. "I don't see what this has to do with your investigation. I think I may say I have always been devoted to her."

"Unquestionably," Rip agreed. "As for its bearing on the case, I think it is very important. When you first went to work for Mrs. Jennifer, your name was already Ida Atlee. You

received your citizenship papers, however, under the name of Ida Von Roehm. During the time that Mrs. Jennifer was married to James Kelland, your nephew, Kurt Von Roehm, appeared in Santa Barbara. That is also a fact, isn't it?"

THE woman's self-assurance deserted her, and she twisted her handkerchief nervously. "Yes—" she whispered, her face bloodless. "I—I hope you do not believe Kurt or I had anything to do with Mr. Jennifer's death. I—oh, it's unthinkable!"

"Mrs. Atlee," Rip persisted, "is Mrs. Jennifer aware of the relationship between you and Kurt?"

"No—" was the desperate answer. "It was my wish, Mr. Ripley. I felt it wouldn't improve his chances socially if it were known."

"You—hoped he might marry Mrs. Jennifer some day?"

The housekeeper nodded and dabbed at her eyes. "I should have told her. To be found out like this is unbearable."

"It needn't be, if you will cooperate with us," Rainbow assured her. "You've been foolish, but your ambition for your nephew is understandable. I wouldn't expect you to say anything that you might feel would be damaging to him or Mrs. Jennifer; you know both are under suspicion. If you are convinced of their innocence, you will do them more harm than good by withholding any information you may have, no matter how personal and embarrassing it may be."

Mrs. Atlee tried to collect herself. It was a moment or two before she trusted herself to speak. "What do you want me to tell you?"

The tall man was not fooled by his apparent success; he knew he had startled her and that fear had had its way with her momentarily, but she was a determined, resourceful woman, and he expected her to rebound quickly and conceal from him whatever she could.

"About the mud that was tracked in, Mrs. Atlee—for some reason, still undisclosed, you and Mrs. Jennifer found it as significant a bit of evidence as my partner and I, and you decided you would deny any knowledge of it. Obviously, your purpose is to protect someone, and that person is Kurt. Are you ready to tell me what it was you coupled with those clods of mud that made them seem so incriminating?"

"Mr. Ripley, you are putting thoughts in my mind that were never there," the housekeeper insisted. "Mrs. Jennifer gave me no instructions in the matter. As for Kurt, he had not been at El Portal for a week prior to the murder; he was at his camp in the desert. He came into Star City on the day preceeding Mr. Jennifer's death and took the train to Reno without stopping here."

"All right, if that's all you have to say," Rip told her. "I have just one more question: Mr. Jennifer was killed on Wednesday night. On Monday afternoon Mrs. Jennifer took her horse and rode across the valley into the Rose Creek Mountains. She met your nephew on the slope beyond the Furnace Creek crossing. We have the evidence to prove it, Mrs. Atlee; I'm not interested in getting your denial or corroboration of that. My question is this: Do you know the purpose of that meeting?"

Mrs. Atlee squared her thin shoulders. "You are very clever, Mr. Ripley," she said, with a cold, patronizing smile. "I assure you the meeting was not for the reason you imply. You speak of it as though it were a closely guarded secret you had discovered. That is hardly the case; Mrs. Jennifer discussed it fully with Mr. Wheeler." It was a bombshell, and she knew it. "Is it possible you gentlemen are working at cross purposes?"

"I could give it a better name than that!" Grumpy growled.

"What was the explanation she gave him?" Rainbow inquired, his tone as matter-of-fact as ever.

"It was about this oil well business. Mr. Jennifer had written Kurt that he had decided against investing in it. Kurt was on the desert. Mrs. Jennifer got word to him to meet her at Furnace Creek. She wanted to tell him about the letter Mr. Jenni-

fer had addressed to him in Reno. She knew how much he had been counting on getting the money for the well."

"Don't you mean she feared there would be a violent explosion when Kurt learned the bad news, and that she arranged the rendezvous so she could plead with him not to make any attempt on Mr. Jennifer's life?"

"Certainly not! Her only purpose was to convince Kurt that she had nothing to do with her husband's change of mind!"

RIPLEY gazed at her with his unwavering gray eyes for a long moment, but she sat there without flinching.

"Mrs. Atlee—if she didn't unsell Mr. Jennifer on the proposition, who did?"

"Mr. Blaine Wheeler. He asked Mr. Jennifer to let him have some of the fossils Kurt found on the Black Rock. He was to take them down to some professor at the University." Ida Atlee's tone was bitter. "He came back with the tale that they were fresh water fossils and proved nothing."

Rainbow got to his feet, a grim look on his lean, bronzed face." That will be all, Mrs. Atlee. I'd like to use this room to question the servants. I'll not keep them more than a few minutes."

The housekeeper nodded coolly. "I'll send them in."

Grumpy could hardly contain himself until the door closed on her.

"Hold it," Rip advised as the little man started to explode. "The situation is just as plain to me as it is to you."

"Good Josephine, we're playin' with a loaded deck!" Grumpy whipped out. "Jest put two and two together and you can't git away from it! Wheeler brought us into the case so he could handcuff us!"

Rip nodded grimly. "I told you there might be some startling developments in the Jennifer case within twenty-four hours. I'm sure of it now!"

CHAPTER IX

The Secret of the White Bag

GRUMPY joined Baker in the hall that they might usher in the servants, one at a time, and prevent them from communicating with the others after they came out.

Laura Fenton, Mrs. Jennifer's personal maid, was the first to be questioned. Rainbow quickly decided she knew nothing that would help them. Alfredo Salazar, the Mexican gardener, was next. He realized it was equally useless to grill him at length. Salazar's wife, who worked in the kitchen, followed. Rainbow spoke to her in Spanish and let her go after a question or two.

The little one stuck his head in the door. "Yo're sendin' 'em out purty quick," he said. "Ain't gittin' nothin' out of 'em, eh?"

"Not a thing. How many more are there?"

"Stony Wiggins and the Chink cook."

"Send Wiggins in," said Rip. "Maybe I'll have better luck with him."

Stony was desert bred and looked it. He dragged his right leg a little—an old injury—but otherwise, though he was in his late sixties, he had the mettle and vitality that a rangeman never quite loses.

"I suppose you are the first one up in the morning," Rainbow began.

"As a rule. I give the hosses their oats before I have breakfast. Got a mare with a young foal right now; I turn them out first thing."

"Stony, where were you when you heard Mr. Jennifer had been murdered?"

"In the kitchen, havin' breakfast. Mrs. Atlee ran in, excited, and told me and Chang what had happened. It was six-thirty."

"Is she usually downstairs as early as that?"

"Yeh, she's an early riser."

"What did you do then?"

"I ran back to the library. Mrs. Jennifer was there, cryin'. I saw the

old man was dead. Mrs. Jennifer told me to go to town and git Wheeler and the sheriff."

"Did you leave at once?"

"No, I had a look around outside fust. I figgered there might be some tracks. There was plenty around, but it'd bin so dry of late that I couldn't make anythin' out of 'em." He shook his head regretfully. "Too bad he had to go like that! I thought I was fixed for life here. I don't suppose the missus will keep the place open. I'll have to be findin' a job."

"I wouldn't be surprised if Mr. Jennifer remembered you in his will," Rainbow told him. "You were one of the few links he had with the past and I don't believe he wanted you turned adrift."

He walked to the door with the old man and gave him a reassuring pat on the back. Grumpy sent the cook in, then. Rip had not paid much attention to the Chinese at the funeral. Regarding him closely now, he realized that the man was not to be confused with the ordinary ranch cook; the round yellow face was expressionless, but the eyes were deeply intelligent. A question or two confirmed his feeling that Gar Chang was not to be dismissed lightly.

"I COOKED for Mrs. Jennifer in Santa Barbara," the yellow man said without a trace of pidgin. "Before that, I worked for other wealthy families. It has always been my rule not to be interested in what went on in a house beyond my kitchen door. On the night Mr. Jennifer was killed, I went up the backstairs to my room about nine o'clock. I remained in my room until morning. I didn't know anything was wrong until the housekeeper rushed into the kitchen."

"I'm afraid you're not going to be much help to us," Rainbow remarked pointedly. The feeling was strong in him that the Chinese was overly quick to protest his complete ignorance of the murder. "Your room is in the south wing, with the other help?"

"Yes, sir."

"Overlooking the dining room?"

"Yes, sir."

"You heard nothing during the night? No sound of a struggle down here? No one leaving the house by way of a dining room window?"

Gar Chang shook his head phlegmatically. "No, sir. One of the first lessons I learned from your people was that the best way for a Chinese to avoid trouble was never to be curious."

Rip drummed on the desk. "'See no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil'." His tone was sharply sarcastic. "I doubt it! You Chinese have a way of seeing and hearing a great deal and saying nothing about it. But your silence doesn't mean things have escaped you."

Gar Chang started to reply, when his slanting eyes lifted in sharp surprise as he caught sight of the heavy, antique jade ring Rainbow was wearing. He stared at it critically for a moment and then, sure of his identification, a friendly smile parted his lips and his face lost its stolid, phlegmatic look.

"What is it?" Rip demanded unthinkingly.

"The ring, sir! It is the talisman of the Family of Seng!" He bowed apologetically. "I should have known who you were, though I have heard your name spoken only once or twice; we Chinese just call you the Good One. I know you have befriended my people."

"They've often befriended me, Chang," Ripley said simply. "You may go; I have no further questions."

The Chinese hesitated and slowly shook his head. "I will tell you what I know. I was not asleep at midnight. I heard one of the dining room windows bang. I looked down and saw a man on one of the little balconies handing a bag to a second man. The night was too dark for me to see who they were. But I saw the white bag. It was the size of a pillow case. They were very careful how they handled it. I watched them walk across the yard and disappear behind the stables."

"Then something was removed from the house!" Rainbow did not at-

tempt to conceal the importance he attached to the disclosure. "Chang—have you mentioned this to anyone?"

The Oriental lifted his shoulders in an eloquent shrug. "I thought it wise for me not to speak. It seldom profits one of my race to meddle in the affairs of white men."

"That has often been true," said Rip. "There is no reason why you should become involved; my partner and I can use the information without referring to you."

Gar Chang started to leave. Rainboy stopped him.

"Chang, did you ever hear Mr. Jennifer complain about all this reckless extravagance?"

Unnoticed, the door had opened. Rebecca stood there, poised, scornful. "Permit me to answer your question, Mr. Ripley," she said with chilling inflection. "You may go, Chang."

RAINBOW arose and pulled out a chair for her.

"Thank you," she murmured. "What you regard as my reckless extravagance is a matter of opinion, I daresay. Perhaps I should remind you that I was not penniless when I married Mr. Jennifer. His sons have the idea that I was simply interested in running through his fortune. You evidently share that opinion."

"To some degree," the tall man admitted.

"That is your privilege. But I don't believe the backstairs gossip you have heard has given you any reason to think Mr. Jennifer was unhappy, or that he ever once objected to the manner in which we lived. He was a strong-willed, independent man and never the kind to be imposed on."

Her voice had a rich, forceful quality. Rainbow was not deaf to its sultry appeal. In the church, seeing her at a distance, he had pronounced her beautiful. Now that she was seated beside him, he found no reason to change his opinion. She wore her black hair parted in the middle and drawn back tightly from her forehead and coiled on her neck. It made an effective frame for her oval face. Her skin was flawless, and he could see that its color was artfully contrived. In that dusky-ivory mask her green eyes burned with a cold intensity. But it was the geranium-red mouth, cruel and exciting, that remained in his mind when he pulled his eyes away.

He said soberly: "I think you are aware, Mrs. Jennifer, that my interest in whether your husband approved or disapproved of the luxury with which you surrounded him is confined to the light it may shed on his death."

"I understand perfectly!" The green eyes burned contemptuously. "Let us speak frankly, Mr. Ripley. I know you are convinced that I killed Mr. Jennifer, or arranged to have him killed. To you this is the familiar lurid story of the woman who marries a wealthy old man, runs through his fortune, tires of him and then has him removed so she can marry the man she loves." Her bitter laugh had a shivery, metallic ring. "The stupidity of it! I'd hardly expect anything as trite and unoriginal even from our sheriff. Mr. Wheeler assured me you were clever! Brilliant!"

"I'm sorry if I disappoint you," Rainbow murmured. "I suspect this is a ruse to draw me out and learn what I really think. If so, I have no objections to speaking freely. Frankly, I can't accept the theory that this case is the old familiar one you mention. I prefer to believe it is only a coincidence that the details are so similar—even to the romance with the needy young man."

"My interest in Kurt Von Roehm will bear inspection!" Rebecca exclaimed, her head held high. "It has never been the sordid affair you infer!"

"I infer nothing, Mrs. Jennifer." Rip's tone was thin and to the point. "I speak only of what I know. I'm not interested in the mutual regard between you and Von Roehm. I'm willing to regard it as just a warm friendship, dating back several years. Mrs. Atlee has undoubtedly told you we know you met Kurt at the Furnace Creek crossing, and why. You not only were concerned enough about him to risk that meeting, but

your sole concern right now is for him, not yourself. For some reason, known only to the two of you and Mrs. Atlee, you believe he murdered Mr. Jennifer."

"That's not true!" she cried. "That's just a conjecture on your part, Mr. Ripley! You haven't a single fact to substantiate it!"

Rainbow gave her a tight-lipped glance. "I think I have," he said flatly. "You believe Kurt was the murderer because something was removed from this house on the night of the crime that you are sure only he would have taken."

REBECCA'S face paled beneath her makeup but her green eyes failed to betray her agitation. "Nothing was taken from this house," she insisted. "Mrs. Atlee and I have checked everything."

"I'm sorry that has to be your answer," Rip said regretfully. "You're making a mistake, Mrs. Jennifer; you're neither helping Kurt nor yourself. I don't mind telling you I am of two minds about him. At the present moment we have evidence enough against him—all circumstantial—to warrant taking him into custody on suspicion of murder."

"He was in Reno that night—" Rebecca interjected. "It would have been impossible for him to have been here."

"I know he has an alibi," Rainbow acknowledged soberly. "Alibis do not always stand up. On the other hand, there is a feeling in me that he had nothing to do with the crime; that he knows nothing about it. But as he told us yesterday, he's the perfect suspect. It places him in danger from two directions."

"I'm dense, I'm afraid," she said. "Will you explain?"

"It's simple enough," said Rainbow. "If he's guilty, he has the law to fear; if he's innocent, certain parties may take advantage of the circumstances and plant enough evidence on him to lead to his conviction and clear their own skirts." He shook his head as he considered the possibilities. "It wouldn't take much."

Rebecca Jennifer sat there with her lips pressed tightly together and her breasts rising and falling with her deep breathing. A conflict raged in her and she was torn between the desire to appeal to him to help Kurt and the feeling that he had only spread a trap for her. In the end, her wariness triumphed.

"I don't want to see Kurt falsely accused," she said carefully. "But there is nothing I can do about it. I'm sorry, Mr. Ripley."

They fenced with their eyes for a moment.

"I'm afraid you're not as sorry now as you will be later on," he said, knowing he was playing his last card. "I think I should warn you that if Von Roehm is convicted of this crime you will undoubtedly be named as his accomplice."

Rebecca gave him a slow, frigid smile. She was convinced he was only trying to trick her into a confession. "I'm not concerned about my ability to prove my innocence."

Rainbow did not press her further. After a few perfunctory questions, he walked to the door with her. They were standing in the hall, speaking with Grumpy and Baker, when Mrs. Atlee admitted the district attorney. He was as angry as a terrier and took no pains to conceal the fact. He spoke to Rebecca.

"I'm sorry these men couldn't wait until I got back to town to question you. I told Baker before I left that I wanted to come up with them." He glared at the sheriff. "I made that plain to you, didn't I, Baker?"

"Just a minute," said Rip. "Cleve relayed your message to us. Questioning Mrs. Jennifer and the servants seemed to me to be a routine matter. I couldn't think of any reason why it was necessary to have you along."

"I don't say it was necessary," Wheeler snapped back. "It was a courtesy you could have shown me. I think you would have accomplished just as much if you had waited a day or two until Mrs. Jennifer had recovered from the shock of the funeral. I feel it is my duty to show her every consideration I can."

"Mr. Ripley was very considerate," Rebecca told him. "I had expected to be questioned, Blaine. It was quite all right. My only regret is that I wasn't able to be of much help to these gentlemen."

WHEELER cooled off quickly. "Are you returning to town when you leave here?" he inquired.

"No, we thought we'd go over to the Wagon Wheel and have a talk with Bill and Ted," Rip answered. "It's only a step."

"I wish you'd wait for me there," said Wheeler. "I learned something in Reno that I believe is important. I'll be along in a few minutes."

The partners were silent as they rode away from El Portal.

"Why don't we say what we're thinking?" Baker urged. "All three of us are of the same opinion about him. He's more interested in setting himself in right with Mrs. Jennifer than doing anything about the murder of her husband."

"I've got my opinion of that gent!" the little one growled. "I've had about as much of him as I can stand!"

Rainbow refused to be drawn out. "Maybe a little straight talk will clear things up," he said. "I'm going to give Wheeler that chance." He turned to the sheriff. "Until we know where we stand with him, I'm not going to say anything to you about what I learned at El Portal. You can understand why, Cleve."

"Sure! I've got to go along with Wheeler whether I like it or not."

When they rode into the Wagon Wheel yard a few minutes later Grumpy's frown faded. Though this was the first time he had seen the ranch he felt he was on familiar ground.

"This ain't no dude outfit!" he declared with relief. "This is a cow ranch! And a dang good one, too!"

For years it had been the Jennifer and Gordon home ranch. Here with its blacksmith shops, wagon barns, ice-houses, provision storage plant. Not all of the beef the company shipped came this way, but a good eighty per cent of it did, some of it coming from as far away as southern Oregon.

At the lower end of the yard an eight-horse team was being hitched to a freighting wagon, laden with flour and other supplies for the northern ranches. Three or four men were watching the teamsters hook up.

"That looks like Bill and Ted down there," Baker said. They turned that way, and it was only a second or two before the two Jennifers saw them and raised a welcoming hand.

"Who's the silver-haired man there with them?" Rip asked.

"Clane Goodnight, the Wagon Wheel foreman," Cleve told him. "He's Jennifer and Gordon from his heels up. Whenever he has anything to say, it's worth listening to."

The Jennifers were pleased to see them. The partners shook hands with Goodnight. The foreman, prematurely gray, had the lean, hard look and unwavering eyes that Rip liked to find in a man. After the freighter pulled out, Bill suggested that they go up to the house. Goodnight left them with a parting nod and crossed the yard to the forge, where his favorite horse was having a shoe reset.

"Have you been able to line up anything?" Ted Jennifer asked, as he walked along at Rip's side.

"We've made some progress," Rainbow told him. "For the short time we've been here, I'd say we'd done rather well."

Bill was just in back of him and overheard what he was saying. "Have you dug up anything against us?"

"No." Rip smiled. "I don't think we expected to. The only suspicion you were under was in your own minds."

"That goes for Martin, too," Grumpy spoke up. "No point in sayin' otherwise. We can rub his name off the slate along with yours."

Bill and Ted refused to comment about Martin. When they reached the house they led the partners and Baker down the gallery to the room that was used as an office.

"Sit down and make yourselves

comfortable," said Bill. His glance went to Rainbow. "Did you have something in particular to say to us?"

"Not exactly. We were at El Portal this morning. We thought we'd come up for a few minutes. Wheeler is there now; he'll be along soon." He pulled his chair nearer to the window so he could watch the road. "That night we talked with you in Reno," he continued casually, "one of you, I forget which, mentioned the possibility of your father having made a new will. Do you remember?"

"Good Lord!" Ted exclaimed. "Do you mean to tell us he did?"

"I don't know for certain, but I'm afraid that's the case. If it is, Wheeler knows about it. I'm going to put it up to him when he gets here. I want you boys and Cleve to clear out and leave us alone with him."

BILL JENNIFER pulled out a handkerchief and mopped the cold perspiration from his face. "This is what I was afraid of!" he groaned. "If the old man changed his will and gave that woman an interest in the ranches, he wasn't acting of his own free will. Even after we fell out with him he promised us the Jennifer and Gordon holdings would be ours. Ted and I helped to make them worth what they are today."

"I wouldn't get excited yet," Rip advised. "I just wanted to tip you off, so if the news is bad, you'll be set for it in a-way."

They were still discussing the matter when Grumpy saw Wheeler coming. He caught Rainbow's eye.

"You boys better drift right now," said Rip. "He'll be here in a few minutes. "I'd rather not have him think I got you out of the way intentionally."

It gave the partners time enough alone together to review what had transpired at El Portal. Rainbow's recital of the information he had received from Gar Chang had an electrifying effect on the little man.

"Good Josephine!" he burst out. "It was robbery as well as murder! That's why the mud tracks was in all three rooms; whoever was in that house to do the job was lookin' for somethin'!" He checked himself abruptly and stared at Rip with puzzled eyes. "Rip, it couldn't have been Von Roehm! He'd been there often enough to know where everythin' was! He'd have gone right to it!"

"I'd think so," the tall man agreed. "I know Chang told me the truth. After insisting he knew nothing at all, he suddenly changed his mind and told me everything. But it only—"

"Was it the ring again?" the little one demanded incredulously.

"Yes, he recognized it."

"Strange!" Grumpy muttered humbly. "It's saved the day for us a good many times. But what were you sayin'?"

"Just that it won't get us very far. We haven't the slightest idea what was in that white bag. Mrs. Jennifer and Mrs. Atlee will swear under oath that nothing was removed from the house."

The little man rubbed his grizzled chin thoughtfully. "Can we be shore that what was taken was valuable?"

"I couldn't believe otherwise. What's your point?"

"That we've got to decide whether that house was entered for the purpose of committin' a murder or a robbery, or both."

"Murder was the principal business; the robbery was incidental." Ripley spoke as though there was no room for doubt in his mind. "Just consider the fact that the heavy library door was closed and that it was a noisy night outside. The killer came in through the dining room, located what he wanted and placed it where he could easily hand it out to his accomplice. He entered the library then and clubbed Mr. Jennifer to death. The evidence shows they met head on. The wounds and position of the body prove it."

"I can believe that part of it. But there's holes in yore argument." The little one shook his head skeptically.

"I don't think so," Rainbow con-

tradicted. "Mrs. Jennifer and her housekeeper are convinced that Von Roehm is involved because they know what was taken and because they feel he would know its value and where to dispose of it. But that doesn't mean they think he was in the house himself that night. He could have used an agent—Gartiez, or Ruby, for instance. That would explain the killer's uncertainty about where to find what he was after. Those women are shrewd; they thought of that when they saw those mud tracks wandering all over the lower floor."

"That begins to hold together a little better now," Grumpy declared weightily. "You didn't say anything to Mrs. Jennifer about Von Roehm being the woman's nephew?"

"Hardly! That's a pretty good string on her. It may be worth something to us." Wheeler had driven into the yard and was getting down from his rig. "Not a word to him about all this," Rip cautioned. "We're not going to pull our punches with this man. He's lied to us, withheld information, concealed evidence. If he's got an explanation, it wants to be a good one, or we're through!"

"Then I predict we'll be through!" the little man growled.

"With Wheeler, but not with this case!" Rainbow rapped. "Whether it makes us a dollar or not, we're seeing it through!"

CHAPTER X

Dangerous Ground

WHEN Wheeler walked into the Wagon Wheel office it was apparent that he had recovered his temper. "Where are the boys?" he inquired.

"They're down the yard somewhere with Cleve," said Rip, his tone in marked contrast to the breezy affability the district attorney affected. Wheeler pretended not to notice. He sat down at the battered desk and took off his hat.

"I'm glad we can be alone for a few minutes," he said. "I hope you'll overlook anything I said at El Portal. I don't blow off like that very often; I've got a lot on my mind." He lowered his voice confidentially. "I checked up a little on Von Roehm's alibi. It's true he spoke to some of the people whose names he gave me, but that was early in the evening. As you know, the opera house is on the second floor of the building. Men stand around downstairs to chat a little before the performance begins. Two or three recall talking with Kurt. But that was early in the evening, about eight o'clock. I couldn't find anyone who recalled seeing or speaking to him after they got upstairs in the opera house."

"What do you make of that?" Rainbow asked woodenly.

"Just this, Ripley: A man could leave Reno on a fast horse at that hour and be up here by one in the morning. Doc Sampson places the time of Mr. Jennifer's death at about midnight. It just as well could have been one o'clock or two; I don't believe Sampson is expert enough to name the exact hour of the crime."

This bold attempt to cast suspicion on Von Roehm did not surprise the partners. They had facts enough in their possession to know Wheeler's story was ridiculous.

"I can't swallow that," Grumpy declared disparagingly. "How did he git back to Reno—on the same hoss? I ain't heard that he was seen in Star City the next mornin'."

"Well, he could have gone out to his camp on the Black Rock," Wheeler replied, somewhat nettled by their lack of interest. He turned to Rainbow. "Nobody ever knows whether he's out there or not. Late at night, he could have used the Furnace Creek road without being seen."

Rip eyed him accusingly. "Wheeler, why are you suddenly so intent on throwing suspicion on Von Roehm?"

"Why, that's absurd!" the district attorney protested hotly. "I'm not throwing suspicion on him beyond what the facts warrant. Someone murdered Henry Jennifer. If Von Roehm is the man, I don't propose to fail in my duty because he happens to be a friend."

"It's too bad you are not equally mindful of your duty with all your friends," the tall man remarked bluntly. Wheeler snapped erect, his eyes blazing.

"What do you mean to infer by that?"

"I'll give it to you straight from the shoulder," said Rip. "When Baker demanded the right to close the library at El Portal until he could get a finger-print man up from Reno, and you overruled him, were you thinking of your duty or were you trying to make sure that Mrs. Jennifer would not be involved in the case?"

"SEE here, Ripley! I won't take that from you!" Wheeler's voice shook with indignation. "When we failed to find the murder weapon, or any other tangible evidence, I refused to believe the killer had gone around that room leaving fingerprints for us to find! I do not doubt but what there were fingerprints all over the library; Mrs. Atlee and every servant in the house had been in there before we arrived." He shook his head disgustedly. "This is just nonsense! I've had some experience with Reno's alleged fingerprint expert! I'd never get anywhere on what he could do for me, and I've got to get a conviction in this case!"

"Do you figure you're improving your chances by withholding information from us?" Rainbow demanded quietly, unmoved by either Wheeler's anger or excuses.

"Yeh!" Grumpy growled. "I'd like to hear yore answer to that!"

"What information have I withheld from you?" Wheeler drew himself up sternly and tried to frown them down.

"The facts Mrs. Jennifer gave you about meeting Von Roehm at the Furnace Creek crossing just before the murder," Rip replied. "If you believe he is the murderer, you could hardly have considered that meeting irrelevant. Or maybe you do at that since Mrs. Jennifer was a party to it."

"I certainly don't regard it as so important that I have to stand here and defend myself to you for having failed to mention it." The district attorney's voice shook with self-righteous indignation. "Before you proceed any further with your investigation, we want to have an understanding. I don't propose to be placed in the position where I have to account to you for my conduct. I brought you into the case to assist me, and for no other purpose!"

Rip shook his head. "I'm afraid that's hardly the truth. You brought us into the case because you knew you couldn't keep us out of it. You didn't want us here. When your bluff was called, you figured you could tie us up hand and foot and when we got sick of banging our heads against a stone wall we'd throw up the sponge and quit. You can make a case for yourself on the fingerprints and the Furnace Creek meeting, but if you'd had any intention of being on the level with us you wouldn't have concealed the fact that only a few days before he was killed you drew a new will for Henry Jennifer. You're a lawyer; you knew it was strong, motivating evidence."

"I deny that!" Wheeler cried, not questioning their knowledge of the will. "The changes Mr. Jennifer made in his will could not possibly have had any bearing on his death. Consider the situation covering El Portal. Mrs. Jennifer was to have the house; the land was part of the Wagon Wheel ranch. All Mr. Jennifer did was to will his wife that part of the ranch south of Rose Creek, with water rights therein."

"Good Josephine, that's all he did, eh?" Grumpy snorted. "That must be about five thousand acres of rangeland!"

"It's little enough when you remember that the Jennifer and Gordon Company owns half a million acres," Wheeler returned nonchalantly. Rainbow just sat and eyed him with cold disfavor for a minute.

"We don't see things the same way, Wheeler," he said thinly. "I don't know what your game is, but we don't want any more of it." He pulled out the deputy sheriff's badge and tossed it on the desk. "Take that

along with you when you go; we're through."

"That's perfectly all right with me!" was the contemptuous answer. "I can handle this matter myself and save the county a few thousand dollars. Before you leave town, drop in and I'll have a check for what's due you."

"We won't be leaving for some time," the tall man remarked softly. "We're going to see this through on our own. You needn't put any check through for us; we'll make the county a present of the time we've put in."

WHEELER picked up his hat and dropped the badge into his pocket. "It's a free country. If you want to spend your time in a private investigation, that's your privilege. But don't expect any help from me or Baker." He tried to appear at ease, but he was alarmed and could not wholly conceal the fact. Breaking with them was only what he had planned to do, but he had not expected it to come so soon or to be accomplished with so little effort on his part. In his calculations, however, he had seen the partners leaving Star City as soon as they could draw their money. The disclosures with which they had just confronted him filled him with an uneasy respect for their shrewdness and sagacity. The thought of having them around, prying into the case and sitting in judgment on every move he made or didn't make was intolerable. He was shrewd enough not to say so, however, knowing that to protest would only make them more determined to remain. There were other ways of getting rid of them, he told himself.

"Possibly Ted and Bill will meet your terms," he remarked caustically. "That's their business, and they can do as they please about it, but if the two of you have the idea that with the backing of the Jennifers you can ride around this county with a dozen cowpunchers at your command and intimidate witnesses, make unlawful entries and trespasses, you will learn your mistake. I intend to make it plain to Ted and Bill that there will be nothing semi-official about your activities, and that I shall hold them, as well as you, strictly accountable to the law."

He marched out of the office, his jaw thrust out at fighting angle, and went down the yard in search of the Jennifers. He found them at the forge. After speaking to them briefly, he returned to his buggy and drove away. The Jennifers and Cleve Baker walked into the office a minute later.

"Is it a fact that you've split with them?" Cleve got out at once. He was excited and not trying to conceal it.

"That's right," Ripley answered. "Grump and I have been in this game too long to take what he was handing us. I don't know whether Wheeler is just trying to pull himself up by his own boot straps, or what, but we decided we'd had enough."

"That puts me in a spot!" Cleve exclaimed. "You know I can't break with him. He's got the political drag; he'd have me removed from office."

"He's ornery enough to do it," Grumpy growled. "I'd clear out of here if I was you, and give us a wide berth in the future. We don't want you to git in a row with him on our account."

"We mean it, Cleve," Rainbow seconded. "We can talk it over on the way in. I've got something to say to Bill and Ted that I think you'd prefer not to hear."

Baker nodded glumly and walked out. Rip turned to the Jennifers. "I was right about the will. Your father made a new one just a few days before he was killed. Wheeler drew it for him. He says the only change was to lop off a slice of this ranch so his wife would own the land El Portal stands on."

"How big a slice?" Bill demanded tensely.

"Everything below the creek, with water rights included."

"Good heavens!" the brothers burst out in a furious chorus.

"The old man couldn't have known what he was doing!" Bill said, aghast.

"For years, we've used that range to fatten our Oregon beef after the long drive from the north! It's been worth thousands of dollars to us!"

"WE'LL fight it, Bill." Ted was equally excited, but he kept his voice down. "This was Rebecca's doing; she whipped him into it."

"I'm not a lawyer," said Rainbow, "but my guess is that you'll have to make the best of it. Blaine Wheeler is no fool. He knew when he drew the will that it was almost certain to be contested. That would have been enough to make him doubly careful that it was airtight. In fact, I think it was his urging, rather than Mrs. Jennifer's, that led your father to make the change."

"What was his reason?" Ted asked, disbelief strong in him. "What did he have to gain?"

"Considerable, if things happen to go his way. El Portal can now be made into a paying ranch. The house by itself is a white elephant."

The brothers looked at him blankly.

"I still don't get it," said Ted.

"I don't blame you," Grumpy muttered. "That coot's got ambitious notions; Rip and I have convinced ourselves he plans to marry Rebecca Jennifer. That'll make him the boss of El Portal."

"I can't believe it!" Bill said bitterly. We always thought that was what Von Roehm was waiting around for. We've never done any spying, but there's been some things we couldn't help noticing."

Rainbow nodded. "Wheeler appreciates all that, but he happens to believe he's in a position to permanently remove his rival. You'll see him go all out to convict Kurt Von Roehm of the murder of your father. He's got a pretty strong circumstantial case against him right now."

"Well, if he's guilty—"

"I'm not at all sure he's guilty. Frankly, my doubts are growing by the minute." Ripley spoke with a great soberness. "I know there's something moving under the surface in this matter that we haven't put our finger on yet. I can feel it, and I know it's ugly....What did Wheeler have to say to you?"

"About what you'd expect," Bill Jennifer answered. "He had the brass to tell us if we tried to do anything about the old man's murder on our own account he'd make things tough for us. But that went in one ear and out the other. I told you in Reno to look us up if you ran into trouble with him. I was sure as long ago as that he wasn't on the level."

"I'll let you judge that for yourselves," Rainbow told them. In a few words, he acquainted them with the district attorney's stand in regard to the fingerprints, his secrecy about the will and the meeting at Furnace Creek.

The brothers were momentarily bewildered by all this. Finally, Ted said: "I used to have a lot of respect for Blaine Wheeler. I never figured he'd turn out to be a double-crossing skunk. He's only using the case to feather his own nest!"

"He'll pay for it if we have anything to say about it!" his brother declared grimly. He turned to the partners. "You boys move out here; make the Wagon Wheel your headquarters. We've got a lot of room in the house and a good string of saddle horses. If you need men, we've got them, too! When you get done, hand us the bill."

"We won't have no bill to render," Grumpy spoke up. "This one's on us, so to speak. Wheeler tried to take us for a couple suckers, and we happen to have a feelin' about anythin' like that."

"Okay, we won't say any more about money now," Bill agreed. "We'll have Clane send one of the boys in with a rig this afternoon to bring you out. We'll see this thing through to the finish, and to hell with Wheeler!"

CHAPTER XI

Death Trap

TED and Bill walked out the hitch-rack with the partners and exchanged a few words with Baker before the three men rode

away. Cleve was so glum on the way in that even Grumpy gave up trying to make conversation.

When they reached Star City they turned down the main street. Rainbow recognized Frank Ruby among the men on the sidewalk. He didn't say anything, but as he got down from his saddle in front of the sheriff's office, he glanced back and saw the thin red-headed man entering the courthouse. He was immediately interested.

"That was Ruby," he said. "Is he often in town, Cleve?"

"Once a month or so, I'd say. I suppose he's got some business in the county clerk's office—taxes or something."

"Is he friendly with Wheeler?"

"He ought to be after the break he got. You can pull your saddles off here and leave the broncs at the rack. I'll have Hank take them around to the barn." He shook his head unhappily. "You know what I've got ahead of me; it isn't going to be pleasant. But I haven't any intention of letting Wheeler lead me around by the nose. If I can do anything for you you know I will."

Rip nodded. "What did you mean, Cleve, when you said Ruby got a break from Wheeler?"

"Matt Bullard, a rancher over in the Lovelocks district, had a couple horses stolen this spring. I found them in Ruby's possession. He claimed he'd bought them from an Indian. But he couldn't show a bill of sale. Wheeler had me bring him in. For some reason, he never prosecuted him. The horses were returned to Bullard and that was the end of it....You fellows will be in town once in a while. You can drop around and say hello, at least."

"Shore!" Grumpy agreed. "Jest keep yore eyes open."

They started down the street with their saddles slung over their shoulders.

"You wait out here," Rip said, as they were passing the courthouse. "I'm going to try to find out what Ruby is doing inside."

He was not gone over ten minutes. "Just what I thought," he told the little one when he returned. "He's upstairs with Wheeler. You can see how things are shaping up."

They discussed it all the way to the hotel, and after they got up to their rooms, they had more to say about it.

"If yo're right," Grumpy argued, "that snake's been buildin' his fences a long time."

"Not so long; just a couple months. When he failed to prosecute Ruby, he knew he put his finger on him when he needed a favor. This is the pay-off. He'll have Cleve take Von Roehm into custody on suspicion of murder in the next day or two. When he's got him in the jug, Ruby will plant some evidence on the man that will take him to trial. This isn't the first time they've talked it over. You remember how willing Ruby was to throw suspicion on Von Roehm when we saw him the other day."

Grumpy got up, still unconvinced, and began tossing his stuff into a bag. "We've made a mistake somewheres," he grumbled. "The German ain't no half-wit. For one thing, why's he hidin' out a couple gents like Gartiez and Pete Rapp if he's as innocent as you seem to think? He certainly knows they're on the dodge for some reason. I reckon it ain't no mystery to him."

"Maybe that's where we went wrong," Rainbow suggested; "maybe Von Roehm isn't harboring that pair. We'll head out into the Black Rock tonight and see what we can learn."

It was after three when they drove out of Star City with Flick McGinnis, the Wagon Wheel puncher. Supper was on the table when they arrived at the ranch.

"I can't tell you exactly where you'll find it," Ted told them in response to a question about the location of Von Roehm's camp. "None of us has been out there, but I understand it's on what we call the Dry Lake. That's about fifteen miles straight east from the Furnace Creek Sink."

"YOU won't have any trouble finding it," said Bill. "If you do, just climb one of the sand hills

and look around. There's plenty of them out there. How long do you think you'll be gone?"

"A day or two," Rip replied.

"Then you'll need water and some grub. I'll have everything ready by the time Clane gets some broncs cut out for you. You've got a couple hours of daylight left. That's time enough to put you on Furnace Creek before dark."

They were ready to pull away half an hour later. Bill and Ted were standing out on the gallery with Rip when Grumpy came out carrying their rifles. The Jennifers looked at the guns askance.

"I didn't know it was to be that sort of a trip," Ted said pointedly. "Maybe we better go along."

Rainbow smiled. "We don't expect any trouble," he said lightly "but if you own an umbrella, it's a good idea to carry it if the weather looks threatening."

By striking across the valley they made a saving of several miles and reached the Furnace Creek road just short of the foothills. Twilight was descending when they reached Martin Jennifer's road. They turned in and followed the road back to the house.

Martin came out. He began by being friendly enough. The partners told him they wanted to cut across his range to the desert.

"We'd prefer that you didn't say anything about it," Rip added.

"Sure, I understand! Help yourselves! If there's anything I can do for you—" He stopped abruptly and his friendliness had disappeared. His dark eyes were fastened on the brand Rip's horse wore. When his eyes shifted it was to the other animal. "Just a minute!" he growled. "Those are Wagon Wheel broncs you're riding!"

"Yes, they are," the tall man agreed. "We've split with Wheeler. We're on our own now, and making our headquarters at Wagon Wheel. It's no reason for you to get excited, Martin."

"I'll use my own judgment about that!" was the furious answer. "No Wagon Wheel critter, human or otherwise, sets foot on my range! You can turn around now and get out of here! And don't come back unless you want to run into trouble!"

"Okay," Rip said easily. "You're making a mistake, Martin, but I'm not foolish enough to think I could make you see it my way. We'll bid you good-evening."

They returned to the road and continued on toward the crossing.

"That was yore idea," Grumpy muttered sourly. "You insisted on turnin' and speakin' to him. What did you think it was goin' to git us?"

"I wanted to get to him before Wheeler had a chance to fill him full of poison about our lining up with Bill and Ted. If we did nothing else, we showed him we're not making a secret of it. Wheeler will have to have some corroborating witnesses; I don't want him to swing Martin Jennifer to his side by working on the man's hatred of his brothers."

The little one accepted this point of view without comment. He rode with his usual wariness. "Come on!" he urged. "We want to git off this road!"

It was black night when they reached the crossing. They took it for granted that the creek formed the line between Martin Jennifer's range and Ruby's horse ranch. They found it sufficient reason for not taking the trail Von Roehm used. Instead, they took to the hills south of Furnace Creek where Kurt had met Rebecca.

They pulled up when they were safe in the scrub timber and waited for the moon to appear. With its coming, the world was turned to silver and black shadow. They went on then, finding the hills vaguely familiar. No one opposed their passing, and it lacked several hours of midnight when they reached the spot where Von Roehm filled his canteens. From a distance, they watched it a long time.

"If he were coming in tonight he'd be here by now," Rainbow said. "We better be moving on."

UNDER a kindly moon the Black Rock was a magic land. The

dwarf sage and clumps of mesquite took strange shapes as they nodded in the night wind, creating a perfect illusion of approaching wagons and ships in full sail. A coyote climbed to the highest point in a field of malpais and made the night hideous with its fearful yipping. He was answered from three or four directions by others of his kind.

The partners held their horses down to a walk and explored every rise and sandhill that rose before them with vigilant eyes. Aware that danger lurked here, they were careful not to ride stirrup to stirrup. Keeping ten to fifteen yards apart, they moved along, quartering slightly to the north. The penetrating midnight chill, common on the high deserts of Nevada, began to work into their bones. One o'clock came, and Rip called Grumpy in.

"We're out far enough," he said.

"That's what I figger." The little one's teeth chattered. "We may be three to four miles north of where we want to be." He glanced at the moon. "She's goin' to set early. Leaves us about an hour to spot Von Roehm's shack."

"Let's be moving," Rainbow urged.

"Before we do, let me have that flask of brandy I saw Bill hand you. I'm shiverin'!"

Barren hills of sand reared up before them after they had moved south for several miles. Rainbow climbed to the top of one on foot and scanned the country ahead. He was there only a few minutes.

"More hills ahead," he said. "I couldn't see any sign of a shack."

From the crest of the second series of hills, he easily located Von Roehm's camp. He waved Grumpy up to him.

"We're as close as we dare to get," he told him. "We better hobble the broncs and lay out here the rest of the night. With the glasses we can see what goes on there tomorrow."

They slept for several hours. At the first sign of dawn Rip began using his binoculars. The sun was high before they got their first glimpse of Kurt. No one else appeared.

The morning wore on and the wind began to blow.

"This sand's goin' to be tough on us," Grumpy complained. "Wind enough to kick it up real good."

The sand got into their food and punished the horses as well as themselves, but they stuck it out, hour after hour. They saw Von Roehm three or four times. He appeared to be there alone.

"If Gartiez and Rapp are anywhere around, it'll be evenin' now before they show up," the little one predicted.

"We'll wait," Rip said.

But evening came on and lengthened into night without bringing the two men. The wind dropped with darkness and the night was still. By ten o'clock Rainbow was convinced it was foolish to wait any longer.

"It looks like this was the mistake we made." The tall man's tone was sharp with disappointment. "I was pretty sure we'd find that pair here."

"Mebbe they pulled out."

"No reason why they should." Rip shook his head. "They're somewhere else, Grump! They know this country backwards."

"Wal, they ain't the only ones who do. When we git ready to dig 'em out we can git Goodnight or someone to ride with us."

"Yeh." Rip stretched his cramped legs. "I guess we can start back. Cleve will be out here tomorrow to arrest Von Roehm. That's a copper-riveted cinch now."

They reached the Rose Creek hills just above Furnace Creek. Working deep into a willow brake, they picketed the horses and slept until daylight. They went to the creek then. There were fresh horse-tracks there, made, Grumpy asserted, during the night.

"Reckon Rapp and Gartiez ain't too far away," he said.

"I hope that's what it means. We were lucky they didn't spot us; we don't want to scare them out."

They reached the road without encountering anyone and had just swung around a wooded bluff below Martin Jennifer's gate, when the sharp, flat crack of a rifle shattered

the morning stillness. Rip felt the slug brush past his face. The shot had come from the bluff. It was closely followed by a second blast. It lifted Grumpy's hat off his head. The little man went limp and pitched to the ground. Yanking his rifle from the boot Rainbow charged up the bluff. He could hear horses breaking through the brush. At a distance of three hundred yards he got his first glimpse of two men dashing across Martin Jennifer's range. He pumped half a dozen shots at them without effect.

RIPLEY had seen Grumpy crumple up. Fearful of what it meant, he returned to the road and found him stretched out where he had fallen in the dust. Some of the tightness left his throat when he saw that the red furrow across the little one's scalp was not deep. He got a canteen and poured its contents over the wound. Grumpy's eyes flicked open. He studied Rip owlishly for a moment.

"That slug pinged off my saddle horn and clipped me," he muttered grimly. "Is it bad?"

"No! Thank God, it's only a crease! I chased 'em, but they got away."

"Rapp and Gartiez, eh?"

"I couldn't see. But I'm sure enough of it. We'll square this, Grump!"

He had cut the sleeve out of his shirt and was fashioning a bandage, when Martin Jennifer and three of his punchers pounded up.

"What goes on here?" Martin roared.

"You can see," said Rip. "A couple skunks tried to wash us out. They were up on the bluff. They broke away across your meadow."

Martin's face turned black with wrath. "I suppose you figure I had a hand in this!"

"No, but the intention was to make people think you had and start them to saying we must have dug up something against you in connection with the murder of your father. That's why they jumped us here."

A violent storm of understanding swept through Martin Jennifer. "I ain't pulling in my horns an inch as far as Bill and Ted are concerned," he said, "but I was a pig-headed fool to turn you away the other evening. Fetch your partner up to the house."

"That isn't necessary," Rip returned.

"I ain't asking you if it's necessary! I'm telling you to bring him to the house! When we get him looked after we're going to do some riding!"

CHAPTER XII

Killer's Mistake

THOUGH Martin Jennifer pressed his entire crew into the search for the bushwhackers, no trace of the two men was found. Rip was convinced that they had long since "lost" themselves on the Black Rock. He got Grumpy back to Wagon Wheel in the late afternoon.

"No reason why this should slow us up," the little one averred. "I ain't goin' to stand for no babyin'!"

"You won't get any," Rip declared, with a dry smile, "but you're going to take things easy for three or four days. You can sit out on the gallery with that stinking pipe of yours, or if you get bored with that you can go down to the forge and chin with the crew."

"What are you goin' to be doin'?"

"Nothing much. After Von Roehm is lodged in jail, I'm going to let things stew for a while and see what the repercussions will be."

Ted came back from town two days later with the news that Kurt had been taken into custody.

"Wheeler can't hold him long on suspicion; he'll have to try for an indictment," Grumpy argued as he ran a straw through the stem of his pipe and blew out the dottle. "Has he done anythin' about that?"

"I don't believe so. I heard he was off to Reno again for a day or two. Arresting Von Roehm didn't cause a ripple in town; everybody seems to feel they've got the right man."

The weather turned pleasantly

warm. The skies were cloudless and the air invigorating. Grumpy refused to admit it, but he found the long, lazy hours out on the gallery, with the life of the great ranch flowing along under his eyes, just the tonic he needed. He had struck up a friendship with Goodnight and made himself popular with the crew.

"We ain't gittin' nowheres, sittin' around like this," he pretended to complain one morning from the depths of his chair, his feet cocked up on the gallery railing.

Rainbow nodded and said nothing. A rig had turned in from the main road up Blue Valley and he found something familiar about its occupant. When the visitor drove into the yard, the partners realized it was Tim Bunker, the reporter. Bunker got down and came over to where they sat.

"I didn't know you were still around," Rip said, by way of greeting. "How does the Jennifer case look to you this morning?"

Bunker grinned. "I was wondering how it looked to you. You know the amazing Mr. Wheeler has Von Roehm locked up. Would it surprise you to learn that Mrs. Jennifer has retained a lawyer to defend him?"

"Why should it?" Rainbow countered.

"I don't know, boys, but it seemed to surprise Wheeler. He got back to town last evening." Bunker rolled a cigarette with great deftness and touched a match to it. "I'm not going to ask why you split with him; I figured that one out myself. Before I forget it, Rip, the agent in Star City is holding a telegram for you. When I filed my copy this morning I happened to mention that I was coming up this way. He asked me to let you know."

"Why didn't you bring it along?" Rainbow asked.

"He wouldn't let me have it. He said to tell you it was from 'Frisco."

Rainbow failed to find that detail enlightening.

"No use speculatin' about it," Grumpy declared. "We'll ride in this afternoon and git it." He noticed Bunker eyeing the strip of adhesive that covered his wound. "Any talk in town about that?" he inquired.

"There was. One of Martin Jennifer's punchers brought the story in. I don't suppose you have anything to say about it."

"NOT yet," Rip answered. "Have you seen Mrs. Jennifer since Von Roehm was arrested?"

"I just came from El Portal. I saw Mrs. Jennifer for a minute. She declined to make any statement. That Atlee dame gave me the rush then. But I met Laura, the maid, in town the other evening and she opened her precious little heart to me." Bunker laughed cynically. "What a nice rotten little world we live in! I can tell you the amazing Mr. Wheeler overplayed his hand badly with dear Rebecca. The sap evidently figured he had enough on her to make her go along with him in his case against Von Roehm. According to Laura, Rebecca damned near tore the hide off him when he showed up at El Portal after Baker made the arrest." His glance ran from Rainbow to the little man. "Why don't you boys get busy and wind this thing up so I can go back to California, where I want to be? You've got the answer to it."

"And no evidence to support it," was Rip's muttered observation. "If you're going to sit this out, Tim, I'm afraid you'll be in Nevada a few days yet."

After Bunker left, Ripley and Grumpy lapsed into a profound silence for some minutes. The former finally was able to sum up his conclusions in a few words.

He said: "I'm not surprised that Mrs. Jennifer is standing by Von Roehm. It's right in line with the attitude she took with me. Wheeler was stupid enough to believe he could scare her into line."

"Wal, he can't back down now. What's he goin' to do?"

"I don't know, Grump. His plans have gone wrong. That's what I was waiting for. I expect this case to take a sudden turn. After dinner, I'll ask Clane to let us have a team, and

we'll drive into town and pick up that wire."

The little one nodded. "You curious about it at all?"

"Not particularly. Why do you ask?"

"Funny," Grumpy said, "but when Bunker told you it was from 'Frisco, the thought popped into my mind that it might be from her." Rainbow's head went up in frank surprise.

"Miss Seng, you mean?"

"Yeh!" The dinner bell rang and the little man put away his pipe. "This Gar Chang could have written her we were here. He may know somethin' he'd tell her that he wouldn't say to you. We know how most of the Chinks feel about her, especially if they git in trouble."

"Yes, but that isn't the case this time." The tall man had no more to say, but it had taken only the mention of Seng Mei-lang's name to quicken his pulse and ignite precious memories. It was her ring he wore, and in the ten months that had passed since he had seen her last, she had seldom been out of his thoughts. Proud, beautiful, possessing all the wisdom and culture of her ancient race, she had unexpectedly crossed his path many times. He knew that in a large measure, much of the success Grumpy and he had enjoyed was traceable to her.

Ripley hurried through dinner, and when he and the little one set out for town, he drove at a rapid gait. Grumpy understood his suppressed eagerness. "I hope the telegram ain't from her," he said to himself, a regretful light in his puckered eyes. "They ain't got nothin' ahead of 'em; every time they meet it only gives 'em another mean wrench."

In the long ago, the little man had begun with a strong distrust of Mei-lang. Her courage and integrity had gradually worn down his resistance and he was just as stubbornly her friend today.

At the railroad depot, Rainbow went in and left Grumpy holding the team. He came out almost at once, the opened telegram in his hand. "You guessed it," he said, with unusual excitement for him; "it's from Mei-lang! She's here in Star City right now. 'Will arrive in Star City Thursday morning train. Meet me. Urgent.' I suppose she's gone to the hotel."

"Git in!" Grumpy ordered. "I'll drive you up there. I don't like the sound of that 'urgent.' It ain't her way to toss words like that around without good reason."

AT THE hotel desk Rip was told that Mei-lang was registered there.

"She left word that if you or your partner came in you were to go up at once," the clerk told him. "She's in parlor B, Mr. Ripley."

"Is Miss Seng alone?"

"No, there's an elderly man, a Doctor Wu Shan, with her."

Grumpy hurried in and the partners went up to the second floor together. Their knock brought a wizened, frock-coated Chinese to the door. He bowed courteously.

"I presume you are Mr. Ripley and Mr. Gibbs," he said. When they assured him this was correct, he introduced himself. "I am Doctor Wu Shan. If you will be seated, gentlemen, I'll tell Miss Seng you are here." He stepped into the next room. "It will be just a minute or two before she joins us," he said on returning. He sat down with the partners and spoke casually about this being his first visit to Nevada. "I am reminded of our own province of Shen-Se, in northern China. You have the same barren mountains here, the same vast stretches of yellow sand, its brilliant sunshine. I am not surprised that so many of my countrymen have felt at home in Nevada."

The inner door opened, and Mei-lang stood there, smiling, her eyes seeking Rainbow. As always, there was an unstudied, unassailable dignity about her.

"Did my telegram startle you?" she asked, looking up at him, so straight and tall, as he took her hand.

"I didn't receive it until a moment ago, Mei-lang; we moved out of town to the Wagon Wheel ranch

a few days back. Naturally, I'm surprised to find you here; and anxious, too, I might add."

He found her as lovely as ever. Instead of the traditional sleeveless, black silk gown so often favored by young Chinese women of high caste, she was dressed in a suit of unbleached shantung, its smooth, graceful lines revealing the slim, delicate perfection of her figure.

"One of my people—Sun Quang, a dealer in Chinese art—was shot to death in his shop on Dupont Street, evening before last," she said, turning to offer her hand to Grumpy. "Though it is a long way from here to San Francisco, I'm convinced there is a connection between his death and the murder of Mr. Henry Jennifer. . . I am happy to see you again, Grumpy. Does that strip of adhesive hide what I think it does?"

"It ain't nothin', Miss Seng," the little one protested. "How did you know we was here?"

"Gar Chang, Mrs. Jennifer's chef, wrote me. And, of course, the newspapers have carried long accounts of this case. If you will be seated, gentlemen, I'll tell you what I know." She hesitated a moment, as though trying to find the proper place to begin. "Have you ever heard me mention the pigeon's blood King-te-chen vases my father brought to America when he was appointed Chinese consul, at San Francisco?"

"Not that I recall," Rip answered, conjectures already taking shape in his mind.

"They were a collector's item even then, as Dr. Wu can tell you," she continued. "They were early 15th century Ming, made in the reign of Yung-lo. You know something about the unfortunate mining investments my father made, after he retired from diplomatic life. The King-te-chen vases were his proudest possession, but he was forced to sell them. Though their value has steadily increased, I've always continued to hope that I might some day be able to reclaim them. They've changed hands many times, but through Dr. Wu, I've kept track of them."

"THAT has not been as difficult as it may sound to you, Mr. Ripley," the aged Chinese remarked. "You see, there is only the one pair of pigeon's blood King-te-chen vases in existence. I have spent the major portion of my life as a collector of antique Chinese porcelains, both for private individuals and such famous museums as the Metropolitan, in New York City. The King-te-chen vases are known to most collectors and dealers as the Seng porcelains. Conservatively, they command a price of fifty thousand dollars today."

"Two days ago, late in the afternoon, a man walked into Sun Quang's shop with the vases in his possession," Mei-lang explained. "He wished to dispose of them, he said, and to get the money quickly, offered them to Sun Quang for thirty thousand dollars. Mr. Sun agreed to the price and promised to have the cash that evening, though the banks had already closed for the day. But in the course of his conversation with the man, he stipulated that he wanted some expert authority, like Dr. Wu, to examine them before the money was paid over, so that he might be sure they were the authentic Seng porcelains."

"That alone might not have frightened him off," Dr. Wu spoke up, "but Sun Quang very foolishly told him that if the vases were authentic they were the only ones in the world and could easily be traced." He turned to Mei-lang. "Shall I continue, or would you prefer to—"

"Please go on," she urged.

"Sun Quang came to my house, gentlemen. He was excited, and when he had told me his story, I could understand why. I suggested to him that the vases had very possibly been stolen. Sun was reluctant to believe it; he saw a very handsome profit in sight. Though he refused to let me call in the police, he agreed to permit me to question the man if I found the vases to be the genuine Sengs. We returned to his shop and waited. But no one came. I realized the man would not come; that he had taken warning from Sun Quang's remarks and was fully aware that he

could neither dispose of the precious porcelains nor keep them in his possession without providing the most damaging evidence against himself. It was eleven o'clock by then. I left the shop and went to Miss Seng's house. Having every reason to believe those rare, priceless treasures had been, or soon would be, destroyed, you can appreciate my feelings, gentlemen."

Dr. Wu's voice faltered and it was a moment before he could continue.

"It was only when Miss Seng asked me to describe the stranger that I realized I had not questioned Sun Quang about the man's appearance. We went to the shop at once. The lights were still on, but no one seemed to be there. I walked through to the back room. Sun was lying on the floor, dead."

"Can there be any question but what he was murdered so he could not identify the person who offered the porcelains for sale?" Mei-lang asked.

"There's no question about it in my mind," said Rip. "I can imagine a possible connection between that crime and the murder that was committed here, but I can't understand why you should be so positive about it."

"Simply because the last known sale of the Seng porcelains was made by a Fifth-Avenue firm, in New York City, about ten months ago," Mei-lang replied. "The purchaser was Mrs. Henry Jennifer."

"Good Josephine!" Grumpy burst out. "That was what was in the white bag! That explains why Mrs. Jennifer and Mrs. Atlee figgered they had to protect Von Roehm!"

"Von Roehm was safe in jail two days ago," Ripley reminded him. "He couldn't have been in San Francisco attempting to dispose of anything. Mei-lang—how much have you told the police?"

"Very little. To have mentioned the Seng porcelains to the police would have removed the last hope of recovering them. Though they are still far beyond my purse, they are no less precious to me on that account."

"I believe they will turn up undamaged," Rip said reassuringly. "The man who tried to sell them was obviously one of the ring that engineered the murder of Mr. Jennifer. When he discovered what an incriminating piece of evidence he had it occurred to him at once, I'm sure, that though he could not realize any money on the vases that they could be very valuable to him in another way. Is it possible no one saw him entering or leaving Sun Quang's shop?"

"No one so far as we could discover," Mei-lang was compelled to admit. "But Dr. Wu believes he can identify the man."

"I thought he had never laid eyes on him," Grumpy declared. Rainbow was equally puzzled. Mei-lang smiled.

"You are not usually so impetuous," she said. "Let me explain. When we found the body it was still warm. I glanced at my watch; it was a few minutes after midnight. We concluded that Sun Quang had been killed within the past half hour. I am familiar with the train schedule between Oakland and Reno; I knew the murderer could not possibly have crossed the bay in time to catch the midnight train for the east. The next one was not due to leave until five minutes past nine the following morning. I was certain then that the man had come from Nevada and would return there at the first opportunity. At my request, Dr. Wu crossed the bay in the morning and watched the passengers board the Chicago Express. You know it is the custom to surrender your luggage to the red caps before getting on the ferry in San Francisco, don't you?"

RIPLEY nodded and urged her to go on.

"You give the number of your car and your Pullman space to the red cap, and when you get on the train in Oakland, your luggage is already in your space. You seldom see a passenger with a bag, but that morning a man came down the platform, walking rapidly, carrying a leather suitcase, large enough to accommo-

date the vases. He found his car, and the porter reached for the bag, but the man waved him away and carried it up the steps himself. He had a compartment, and as soon as he reached it, locked himself in. From the Pullman conductor, the doctor learned he was going to Reno."

"Can you describe the man?" Rainbow asked the aged Chinese.

"He was of medium build, Mr. Ripley. Sandy-haired, his face rather intelligent. I wouldn't venture to say how old he was, but certainly under forty. Naturally, I would recognize him."

Rip and the little one exchanged an inscrutable glance. What they had just heard fitted perfectly into the framework of believable conjecture and provable fact they had put together in their minds regarding the Jennifer case. Some pieces of the puzzle were still missing. The temptation to supply them out of their imagination was difficult to resist.

"In the absence of any evidence to support your contention that the man on the train was the murderer of Sun Quang," Rainbow observed with sober consideration, "I think it would be a mistake to count too heavily on it."

"I agree with you completely," said Mei-lang. "If the man were to walk in here now, all Dr. Wu could do would be identify him as the man at the train. Its importance beyond that would depend on whether there was any evidence to connect him with the death of Mr. Jennifer. It was because of that possibility I persuaded Dr. Wu to come to Nevada with me."

Ripley assured her of his hearty approval of what she had done. He had never found her judgment at fault.

"But I have to warn you that you and Dr. Wu are not safe here," he said. "It would be foolhardy for you to remain in this hotel. If the man who attempted to sell the porcelains came from Star City, and I'm sure he did, he will be very suspicious of your presence. If he found it necessary to kill Sun Quang to protect himself, he would not hesitate to kill you."

"Why can't we take Miss Seng and the doctor out to the ranch?" Grumpy demanded. "They'd be safe there. Bill and Ted would be glad to have them."

"I was about to suggest that," said Rainbow. "You will be quite comfortable at the Wagon Wheel, Mei-lang. The Jennifer boys will show you every consideration, and I will feel much better. Do you mind?"

"Not at all." She glanced at the doctor and got his approving nod. "We came to Nevada for the double purpose of helping you and saving the Seng porcelains. Nothing else matters. . . When shall we go?"

"Right now will not be too soon," was the tall man's frank, unhesitating response. "We drove in; we can take you out with us. . . How soon can you be ready?"

"In just a few minutes—"

Rip nodded. "Grump and I will wait for you in the lobby."

THE little one no sooner reached the stairs than he began to unburden himself. "This blows the lid off of things!" he exclaimed fiercely. "You know who our man is now, I reckon!"

"I've been pretty sure of it for days," Rainbow said in his tight-lipped way. "But I can promise you we're going to keep what we know to ourselves for the present. If we don't, we can kiss those porcelain vases good-bye. There's an alley at the rear of the hotel. You drive around there; we'll get Mei-lang and the doctor out that way. I want as few people as possible to see them leaving Star City with us. We can avoid the main street by driving out across the flats to that hide and wool barn east of town, and cutting into the Furnace Creek road there."

Grumpy hurried out, but he was back almost at once.

"Rip, Tim Bunker and Wheeler are comin' up the street!" he got out excitedly. "We don't want them bustin' in here jest now! If you'll handle the team, I'll stop those gents!"

"How?"

"With some first-class gab! You wait for me out there at that barn!"

From the door Rainbow saw the little one meet the two men. After some violent words, the three of them turned back up the street and disappeared into the sheriff's office. Driving around to the alley, Rip placed Mei-lang and Dr. Wu in the buckboard and reached the unused storage barn on the Furnace Creek Road without any difficulty. There, they waited better than half an hour before they saw Grumpy trudging toward them.

"It was a cinch!" the little man declared, as he climbed over the wheel and sat down with Dr. Wu. He was pleased with himself. "I told Wheeler I wanted to see Von Roehm about somethin' important. He refused his permission, as I figgered he would. I said okay, I'd see Baker and git permission from him." The little one chuckled. "Wheeler dang near had a hemorrhage and ran his legs off beatin' me back to the sheriff's office!"

"Did you see Kurt?" Rip inquired innocently.

"Good Josephine, I didn't want to see him! But I saw somethin' else that opened my eyes. I mean the indictment the Grand Jury handed up this afternoon against Von Roehm. He's been charged with murder in the first degree."

"That just about convinces me we won't have to look for your porcelain vases, Mei-lang," Rainbow declared cryptically, as he touched up the team. "They'll be found for us."

CHAPTER XIII

Mysterious Rendezvous

MEI-LANG'S presence in the Wagon Wheel house had a noticeable effect on its free and easy ways. For twenty years, it had been a man's house. Old Cozy, the Jennifers' "housekeeper" and general factotum, gave it such a scouring as it had not known in his time. Rugs appeared on the usually bare floors; curtains were brought out of hidden drawers. When one of the crew came to the house, he got as far as the office, and no further. The shrewish old man not only shaved every morning now, but served the meals in style and further surprised the boys by wearing a white waiter's jacket that they could not remember ever having seen before.

The partners had found it advisable to take Bill and Ted into their complete confidence, even to the details regarding Opal Charlie's death. Much of it amazed the Jennifers.

Three days passed without bringing the expected development in connection with the porcelains. Rainbow had repeatedly expressed the belief that they would be found in Von Roehm's shack on the Black Rock and used against him, but his faith was wavering.

"They undoubtedly know Miss Seng and Dr. Wu are here," Bill said to him as they sat in the office, late in the evening. Mei-lang and Dr Wu had retired. "It's scared them off."

"I suppose they know, all right," Ripley replied, "and it must have thrown some fear into them. But I don't believe that's the reason we haven't heard anything. There must be another string to it."

"Most likely Wheeler's fixin' up a bait for Mrs Jennifer," Grumpy asserted. "He could sell her a bill of goods that would make things tough for us."

"Why, you've got a strong case," Bill insisted. "You've got facts enough."

"A good lawyer would tear it to pieces," said Rip. "All we need is one piece of evidence that can't be broken down. But we need that piece."

There was no doubt in his mind but what time was running out on Wheeler. Von Roehm was due to come up for arraignment three days hence, to either be bound over to stand trial or be given his freedom. If the vases were to be used against him, he felt some move would be made before then.

When Mei-lang came down for breakfast, Rainbow had a question

for her. "When Sun Quang came to Dr. Wu about his mysterious visitor, did he say anything about having mentioned the doctor's name to the man?"

"I believe he did," she replied. "It would be the natural thing to do. Why do you ask, Rainbow?"

"Because if that is the case, then all Wheeler would have to do to be put on guard would be to discover Dr. Wu's name on the hotel register. I'm afraid that's what has happened."

The proof of this came to him that morning, when Tim Bunker arrived at the ranch. The partners were not surprised at his coming.

"That amachure bloodhound has found out somethin'," Grumpy predicted.

BUNKER jerked a nod at them and asked them to step across the yard. "So we can go into a little private huddle," he explained. "I didn't drive out here because I like the scenery."

"If it's that important, Tim, don't hold it back," Rip said, with a dry smile. "What is it?"

"I was in the hotel yesterday when Wheeler marches in. He looks over the register, and something seems to hit him right between the eyes. He talks to the clerk a couple minutes and then goes steaming out. I tried to get a word with him, but he gave me the brush-off. It doesn't take me long to wangle some information out of the boy at the desk. What Wheeler had been looking for was the signatures of two San Francisco Chinese, Miss Seng Mei-lang and a Dr. Wu Shan, the well-known Chinese art expert. He asked the clerk what had become of them. Dick opened up innocently and told him you boys had brought them up here."

"What's so exciting about that?" Rip queried lightly.

"Don't kid me," Tim returned flatly. "I know this is big stuff. When Wheeler sailed out of the hotel he was white around the gills. I'm well acquainted with Miss Seng, through her work for the China Society, and I'm familiar with her connection with you boys. I know Dr. Wu, too. They're important people, and they're not up here right now for nothing. There's no reason why you should stall with me; I've shown you where I stand."

He pulled out a folded copy of a San Francisco newspaper and pointed to a marked story.

"This is an A. P. account of a Chinatown murder. An art dealer by the name of Sun Quang was knocked off in his store on Dupont Street the other night. When the police got there, Miss Seng and Dr. Wu were in the shop. Isn't that where the tie-up comes in?"

Rainbow knew it was foolish to hedge. "Tim—is this off the record?"

"Strictly!"

"Okay, then! They're here because that Chinatown killing stemmed out of the murder of Mr. Jennifer. That's as much as I'm going to tell you now, but I promise you you're on the inside of a story that will stay on the front-pages for a few days when it breaks."

Bunker grinned. "I knew it! Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, something important. You recall that Wheeler was away the first of the week. He gave out that he was going to Reno."

"Yeh," Tim grunted skeptically. "I wonder if it was to Reno he went."

"That's what I want you to check on," said Rip. "Don't be satisfied with just finding he was registered somewhere; you make sure whether he was actually in Reno those three days."

"I shouldn't have any trouble getting that information," the newspaperman declared confidently. "I'll go down this evening."

Bunker did not stay long.

"I wouldn't say anythin' about this to Miss Seng," the little one advised, as Rip and he went back to the house. "It'd set her to worryin' about the doctor. You know she's smart enough to see in a second that Wheeler must be gittin' desperate enough to do somethin', and that the most likely thing for him to try is to send a couple of his blacklegs sneakin' in here to pick the old man off."

Ripley nodded. "It would be foolish to say anything, not that I think Wheeler is hair-brained enough to make any attempt on Dr. Wu's life. Goodnight is keeping three or four men handy. It would be almost impossible for anyone to steal in here unnoticed."

The little one was not convinced.

"A man could work down the Rose Crick bottoms after dark and git close enough to use a rifle. Jest to be on the safe side, suppose we ride up the crick for an hour or two and make shore there's no one in them willow brakes."

RAINBOW was not averse to this, and they spent the rest of the morning exploring the creek bottom. They found nothing to arouse their suspicions. They were still a mile above the house, when they heard the dinner bell. They came in and were exchanging a word with Goodnight and Ted when all four stiffened as a madly-driven horse thundered across the ranch bridge. The horseman dashed into the yard, his long-legged bay dripping wet. Ted Jennifer sucked in his breath with a throaty rasp.

"It's Martin!" he ground out, his face hard and flat.

Martin Jennifer pulled his horse to a slithering stop a few feet from them. He glared at Ted with his usual implacable hatred. Before he spoke, his eyes darted around the yard, looking for Bill. The latter had gone up the valley for the day.

"I swore by all that's holy I'd never set foot on this ranch!" he snarled. "If I'm here now it ain't because I want to be! But there's something I figure you should know, Ripley. I was going to look into it myself without coming for you. But then, I got to thinking that might be the wrong thing to do. I been stewing about this all morning."

Rainbow glanced at Ted. The latter's face was rocky, but he said: "Will you get down and go into the office?"

Martin shook his head firmly. "That won't be necessary; I can tell you what I've got to say right here. My foreman told me he saw Blaine Wheeler passing the place last evening just before dark. I reckoned he was going to Frank Ruby's house. I don't know what business he's got with Ruby. I didn't get excited about that, but I was curious enough to be on the creek this morning, seeing what I could see. I heard someone coming, and I pulled into the trees. I'm damned if it wasn't Mrs. Jennifer! She stuck to the trail Von Roehm always used. I watched her till she headed out into the Black Rock. I knew then where she was going."

"Did she see you?" Rip demanded.

"No, and that was a lucky thing, 'cause she no sooner gets out a short way than she's followed. This party passes within a hundred yards of me, and it's Wheeler! He don't try to overtake her. He hangs back and just tags after her. I don't know what it means. Maybe it's something they made up between them, and maybe it ain't." Martin wiped his perspiring face on his sleeve. "I heard they'd had a big row over Von Roehm. That sneak Wheeler could be following her out there to kill her."

Martin glared at them as though expecting one or all to rebuke him for imputing such a motive to the district attorney. But no voice was raised in Wheeler's defense. They were not even surprised by his accusation. He didn't know quite how to take it.

"I may be wrong about that," he muttered, less positive now, "but there can't be no question what she's going out to that shack for. There's evidence there that she wants to destroy!"

The partners were in no doubt as to what the evidence was. Ted Jennifer got its import, too.

"I'm sorry you didn't come sooner, Martin," Rip said tensely. "It'll be evening before we can get out there. That may be too late. But I can tell you it is of the utmost importance that we get there as quickly as we can." He turned to Goodnight. "Clane, get us some fresh broncs and a couple canteens of water while we

grab a bit to eat. I want Ted to go with us; I'll depend on you to see that Miss Seng and the doctor are safe while we're away. Martin, that horse of yours is all in. It may be poison to you to have to fork a Wagon Wheel bronc, but you've got to do it."

"The bay will get me back to my place," Martin growled. "I'll turn around now and you fellows can overtake me."

HE SWUNG the animal and loped away. Rainbow hurried inside for a word with Mei-lang.

"It must be the porcelains," she said, when he had related Martin's story. "In some way, Mrs. Jennifer has been led to believe the vases are there in the camp."

"I'm positive of that," the tall man told her. "Wheeler has had them planted there. He has very cleverly baited the trap for her. What he wante to do now is to catch her in the act of trying to conceal the evidence. I don't believe he would kill her, but I'm not ruling out any possibility. I know it will be after midnight before we get back. I want you to promise me you'll not let Dr. Wu leave the yard. This ranch interests him. I found him yesterday afternoon half a mile up the creek, examining a vein of quartz."

Mei-lang smiled indulgently. "Looking for gold, I suppose."

They were alone for a moment, and she raised her eyes in a tender appeal.

"You are riding into possible danger," she murmured, "yet your thought is for my safety. It has always been so." Her lips were suddenly tremulous. "You know my heart travels with you."

"And mine remains with you—no matter how far apart we are!"

He drew her close and crushed his lips against her mouth. For a moment, they stood there, forgetting the realities that both knew must forever keep them apart. When Rainbow released her, his gray eyes were sober wells of regret.

"I wish I had the courage never to see you again," he said. "I don't want to hurt you, Mei-lang, and I know I have; I can see it in your eyes."

She gazed at him fondly, and for a moment she was wholly his. "It is a precious hurt, my darling," she whispered. "You must go now. There is Grumpy calling."

The partners and Ted Jennifer overtook Martin soon after reaching the Furnace Creek road. His stubbornness cost them at least half an hour in reaching his ranch. With a fresh horse under him, they headed east across his range for the Furnace Creek Sink. Grumpy found a chance to exchange a word with Rip. He couldn't get over the fact that Martin and Ted were riding together.

"I wish we could bring the three of 'em together," he declared feelingly. "Their old grudge has been kept alive too long and for no good reason; none of 'em was ever responsible for what old Slick-ear did."

"I'd like to see it, too," Rainbow replied. "Maybe we can do something about it."

The sun had set by the time they reached the sink.

"It'll be a miracle if we find them still there," Martin grumbled, as they pushed out into the desert. His crew had not seen anyone come in from the Black Rock, but that didn't prove anything, as he readily admitted. "They could have come in down below. If they didn't want to be seen, they wouldn't have used the road."

The twilight deepened and night came on while they were still several miles from Von Roehm's camp. Grumpy was the first to grow suspciious about a curious redness in the sky. It was not long, however, before all four knew what it meant.

"That's a fire!" Teo exclaimed. "The shack is burning down! What do you suppose it means, Rip?"

Rainbow shook his head gravely. "I don't know. I'm almost afraid to put what I'm thinking into words. Come on! Let's shake these broncs up a little!"

His hope that they might be in time to put out the fire faded while they were still an appreciable distance away. The roof had already

fallen and the walls were ready to cave in.

"No one here! No hosses around!" Grumpy announced after circling the burning ruins. I don't know who set this place afire, but if it was Wheeler or Mrs. Jennifer, I can't figger the reason for it."

"We may find something when the ashes cool off that'll give us the reason," Rip declared grimly.

"You mean the vases?" the little one asked.

"Good Lord!" Ted cried, when he saw Ripley shake his head. "You don't mean Rebecca?"

"We'll have to wait and see. It'll be an hour before we can start digging in there."

CHAPTER XIV

Grumpy Settles an Account

WITH grim faces, the four men waited for the fire to burn itself out. Grumpy found an undamaged shovel and attempted to turn over some of the ashes, but they were still so hot that he was driven back.

"If this fire was set to cover up a murder," he declared weightily. "you'll find it wasn't Mrs. Jennifer was killed. It's a lot more likely she stuck a gun in Wheeler's belly and let him have it—and with good reason, I reckon!"

That possibility had occurred to Rainbow, and he found it plausible enough. "I believe she's got iron enough in her to do it," he said. "There's no question in my mind but what the place was destroyed deliberately, and for a very definite purpose. But Wheeler and Mrs. Jennifer must have got here shortly after ten this morning. Whatever passed between them occurred in the next few minutes, yet this fire was not more than an hour ago. Is it reasonable to suppose one or both stuck around here all day?"

"It shore is if they figgered they hadn't been seen and didn't want to be," the little man asserted. "They'd time themselves to leave here so they'd reach the hills jest about dark. I'm tellin' you if we don't find anythin' in the ashes that this fire is a fooler, set to convince us that there's no reason to look here for anybody who's on the dodge."

Ted and Martin knew to whom he referred. "Standing here in front of this fire is inviting a shot, if there's anybody hanging around," the latter remarked. "Might not be a bad idea for a couple of us to drop back a few yards and have a look around."

"Suppose you and Ted do that," Rip said. "We'll be able to get in there in a few minutes."

The two Jennifers rode off and began circling around the ruined camp. Grumpy picked up his shovel and attacked the blackening ashes. For an hour, he and Rip turned them over without finding anything. It convinced them there was nothing to be gained by remaining any longer.

"Whatever evidence there was here is gone now," Martin grumbled disgustedly. "It's plain enough to me that she and Wheeler made a deal of some sort."

"That's the only conclusion I can reach," said Ripley. He knew things had gone against them and he did not try to conceal his dismay. "Wheeler hasn't many tricks left in his bag; but this was the best one, and he was smart enough to use it."

"Mebbe it won't stand up for him," Grumpy growled.

"It won't if we can get to Mrs. Jennifer."

They left Martin at the Double Diamond and came out of the hills into Blue Valley. It was well after midnight. They were saddle weary and had little to say. Ted broke a long silence to ask why Wheeler had bothered to steal the vases from El Portal.

"He was playing for bigger stake than that, Rip."

"Of course! But he needed money to pay off Ruby and the rest of them. That's why he didn't lose any time trying to dispose of the porcelains. That bunch wants to pull out, and they need cash. I suppose they've been putting the pressure on him pretty hard."

"I hope so!" the little one snorted.

"It musta been quite a surprise to 'em when they learned the vases wasn't goin' to be worth a dime to 'em!"

"Yeh, and quite a surprise to Wheeler," said Rip. "He evidently heard Mrs. Jennifer say how valuable they were and didn't bother to get their history."

THEY had just crossed the Wagon Wheel bridge and ridden into the yard when they heard a sharp, frightened cry from the house. It was a woman's voice. Rainbow realized instantly that it was Mei-lang. Before he could move, a shot rang out. It galvanized all three men to action. Rip raced across and darted into the house; Grumpy and Ted ran around to side of the building on which Mei-lang's room was located. The shot had awakened Bill Jennifer. He shoved up a window and stuck his head out. He recognized his brother.

"What's wrong?" he yelled. "What was that shot?"

"I don't know!" Ted shouted back. "Get down here and ring the bell for Clane and the men!"

Grumpy had already turned the corner and was in time to see a man leap off the roof of the gallery and dash across the yard to some trees. He snapped a shot at him, but the intruder reached his horse and pounded away. With a cry to Ted, the little one took up the chase. Ted caught up with him. Together, they swept past the corrals and into the willow brakes along the creek.

Calling to Mei-lang, Rainbow had sped up the stairs. He found her at the open door of Dr. Wu's, a gun in her hand.

"Thank God, you're not hurt!" he whipped out tensely. "And the doctor?"

"He's perfectly all right," she answered, her voice calm and steady. "It was I who fired the shot. I hadn't been able to go to sleep; it was getting late, and you were not back. Lying in bed, I thought I heard someone at Dr. Wu's window. I slipped into a robe and got my pistol. I went to his door and listened. I knew then that I hadn't been mistaken; someone was removing the screen from the window. I tried the door. It wasn't locked. When I looked into the room, the man was coming through the window. I screamed, thinking it might frighten him." She smiled up at Ripley. "I was frightened, too."

"Well?" he prompted.

"He started to rush at me, and I fired. I don't know whether the bullet hit him or not, but he turned and disappeared through the window."

"If he leaped off the gallery, Grump and Ted must have seen him." Rip hurried to the window and closed it. "The house is aroused now. You light a lamp and wait up till we get back."

He bumped into Bill and Goodnight at the foot of the stairs. Without waiting to give them an explanation, he ran out to his horse. The sound of receding hoofs told him which way the chase had gone. He turned that way and had just passed beyond sight of the house when a gun crashed three times in quick succession.

He pulled up sharply and listened. The night was still again. "Grump!" he yelled.

An answering call from the creek bottom turned him that way. He found Ted and the little one gazing at something on the ground.

"What happened?" he demanded grimly.

"I stopped the dirty scut!" Grumpy growled. "It's Pete Rapp!"

"Rapp?" was Rip's startled response. He got down and took a look at the dead man. "It's Rapp, all right! Did you fire all three shots?"

"No, he got in the first one! Burnt my bronc a little. Is—everythin' okay at the house?"

"Yeh, Mei-lang drove him off just in time."

HE HAD just finished repeating what she had told him when Bill Jennifer and half a dozen of his men found them. Goodnight blamed himself for not having kept a man posted at the house.

"I never thought anyone would try

to bust in that way," he said regretfully.

"It wasn't your fault, Clane," Rip assured him. "I didn't think if an attempt was made on Dr. Wu's life that it would come this way, either."

"We'll have to notify Baker," said Bill. He was taking a sober view of the incident. "Wheeler may try to make us some trouble over this."

"I'm not interested in what Wheeler does about it," Rainbow stated bluntly. "If you think he'll try to twist the facts around and hold you responsible for the death of this man, forget it! Blaine Wheeler won't have any time for that. I predict he won't even come up here to view the body."

They returned to the house. Mei-lang dressed, and joined them in the office. Rip told her what had happened. She took it calmly and apologized for Dr. Wu's inability to come down.

"Violence is foreign to him," she said. "He's badly shaken; he is an aged man."

"We understand," said Ted. "I'll go out to the kitchen and make a pot of coffee. Maybe I can find some bread and cold meat."

While he was gone, Rainbow related what had happened at the camp on the desert. He could feel Bill tightening up every time Martin's name was mentioned. Finally, the man could endure no more of it.

"Do you mean to tell me, Rip, that Ted went to the Double Diamond and rode with Martin?" he demanded incredulously.

"Yes, and it didn't seem to hurt either one of them." Rainbow wisely said no more about it and went on with his story.

"It was very clever of the man to lure Mrs. Jennifer out there and trap her with the porcelains in her possession," said Mei-lang. "When she saw them there, she must have been convinced Von Roehm was guilty. It put him in position to bargain with her. Whatever her faults may be, I can't help pitying her; what she is doing is not for herself."

Bill Jennifer's mouth tightened; he had no sympathy for Rebecca, no matter what her predicament. Rip was glad to have Ted come in with the coffee and some sandwiches at that moment.

They heard a rider leave the yard and turn into the valley road, and knew Goodnight had sent Flick McGinnis to fetch the sheriff and coroner.

"Cleve won't be able to get Doc Sampson up here before morning," Ted said. "What sort of a story are we going to tell them?"

"The truth ought to be good enough," Rainbow stated. "We were lucky to have this affair end the way it did."

"We can thank Miss Seng." Ted Jennifer was openly impressed with her courage. He turned to her. "There isn't one woman in a hundred would have nerve enough to open that door. I wish you'd let me make you some tea; I forgot that you never take coffee. It'll be just a minute—"

"No, please," Mei-lang insisted. "I'm afraid my nerves are too frayed for even as mild a stimulant as tea." Her eyes strayed to Rip. "Are you still of the opinion the Seng porcelains will be found?"

"I'm more convinced of it than ever," he answered sincerely. "They were not destroyed in the fire. I'm sure of that."

"So am I," Grumpy echoed. "We went through the ashes mighty careful. As Rip told you, we're shore Wheeler made a deal with Mrs. Jennifer. If he did, the vases was the important consideration."

"Have you any idea of what that bargain was?" Bill asked.

"Yes, in a general way. I propose to see Mrs. Jennifer tomorrow. I believe she'll be quite willing to talk when she's heard what I have to say." Rainbow turned to Mei-lang. "I want you and the doctor to go to El Portal with us. We won't leave too early. Tim Bunker, the reporter, is in Reno gathering some information for us. I expect him back on the morning train. We'll give him time to get up here. We'd have to wait for the sheriff, anyhow."

THE partners were having an early breakfast with Bill and

Ted when old Cozy announced that Baker had just ridden in. Cleve had the coroner with him. The former walked into the dining room and at Bill's invitation sat down to have a cup of coffee with them.

"Rapp was always a bad character," he said, after asking a few perfunctory questions. "Putting him out of the way is one of the best things ever happened to this community. McGinnis told me Grumpy saw Rapp leap off the roof of the gallery; that he'd been in the house."

"That's right," the little man confirmed. "I suppose you know what he was doing here."

"I don't know whether I do or not."

"I think you should know," said Rip. With complete frankness he told Baker the facts.

"That's good enough for me," the sheriff declared. "If an armed man breaks into your house, you're justified in killing him. I tried to get Wheeler to come up with me, but he was full of excuses. Are you going to be in the courtroom when Von Roehm comes up before Judge Barrett for his hearing, day after tomorrow?"

"If there is a hearing, we'll be there," Rainbow replied. "But a lot of things can happen between now and Friday morning, Cleve."

The sheriff thought that over for a moment and found his own answer. A shrewd look tugged at his face and pulled down the corners of his mouth. "There'll be a hearing, all right, but I won't be surprised if Von Roehm walks out of the courtroom a free man. Wheeler as good as told me so this morning. He pretended that it was only a slip, but I knew he was handing it out deliberately. If you boys will show us where the body is, Doc can have a look at it and we'll take it in."

Grumpy got Rip aside for a moment as they were leaving the house. "What Cleve said was the tip-off," he declared, his hard-bitten face shrewd and sober. "Easin' up on Von Roehm was the deal Wheeler made with Mrs. Jennifer."

"I'm sure of it," the tall man agreed.

Baker and the coroner had left with the body before Mei-lang came down. Ripley found her in the dining room with Dr. Wu. The latter seemed to be quite himself again. "At eighty," he said, a twinkle in his eyes, "one is compelled to take such things seriously. My heart is not what is used to be."

"You will not have to undergo such an experience again," Rainbow assured him; "we'll guard against that. Bunker isn't here yet. If he doesn't come in the next thirty minutes, we'll go."

He had almost given up hope of seeing Tim, when a rapidly-driven rig appeared on the road. It turned into the Wagon Wheel, and he and Grumpy recognized the reporter. They went out to meet him.

"The train was a little late," Bunker explained. "I got the information you wanted, Rip, and I imagine it's what you expected. Wheeler registered at the Golden, but his bed was not slept in on the night of the 14th. I talked to the maid and housekeeper, and they recalled the incident clearly, mainly because Wheeler has stopped there so often they've come to know him."

Rainbow actually beamed. "That's perfect!" he exclaimed. "Wheeler had to be away only one night to make the round trip to San Francisco. We had a little excitement here last night—"

"So I hear," Tim acknowledged. "I stopped Baker and Doc Sampson on the road. Am I free to use the story?"

Rip nodded. "Help yourself. Ted Jennifer will give you the details. Grump and I are leaving for El Portal in a few minutes with Miss Seng and Dr. Wu."

Tim Bunker's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Sounds like the Jennifer case might be getting near the boiling point." He flipped a cigarette into shape. "This ought to be a stunner when it breaks. I did a story about a pair of vases Miss Seng's father, Seng Hung-chang, brought to America. The Seng porcelains they

were called. It must have been five years ago I wrote the piece. Would you advise me to ask the office to dig it out of the files, so I could brush it up, just in case it might be worth reprinting?"

Rainbow gave him an amused, tight-lipped smile. "I'd advise you to get back to Star City and sit tight You're familiar with that old line about there being many a slip twixt the cup and the lip. Well, that describes the situation perfectly."

Bunker sobered instantly. "Do you mean that? I thought you were ready to pin his ears back."

Rip shook his head. "That depends on what success we have with Mrs. Jennifer."

CHAPTER XV

Evidence to Convict

"I CAN only repeat that Mrs. Jennifer is not receiving anyone," the housekeeper insisted, her eyes cold with disapproval as they swept Mei-lang, the partners and Dr. Wu. "She is leaving for California in a day or two; I don't believe she possibly could see you until she returns."

Rainbow had no intention of being dismissed in that fashion. "I know Mrs. Jennifer has some reason to believe Kurt will be given his freedom on Friday. You doubtless are aware of it, too. I wonder how you can count on it, now that you are completely convinced of his guilt."

"I have no comment to make," Mrs. Atlee said icily. "If you will excuse me, please—"

"I'm sorry," said Rip, "but I shall have to insist on seeing Mrs. Jennifer. Your nephew's fate depends on it. I'm not threatening you, Mrs. Atlee, but you do owe me a favor. I think you understand."

Ida Atlee's sharp features became even thinner and keener edged. "Very well!" she snapped. "If you will come in, I'll tell her you are here."

She showed them into a small reception room off the hall. They had waited only a few minutes when Rebecca came in. She betrayed no sign of uneasiness. Her pale olive make-up and black hair were as startling as usual. She bowed to Mei-lang. The latter returned her glance with an obscure, feminine interest.

The housekeeper withdrew, but Rainbow was sure she was no farther away than the hall, where she could overhear every word. Rebecca's little start of surprise when he introduced Mei-lang and the doctor did not escape him. He was sure she surmised at once why they were there, and he was inclined to believe this was the first she knew of their presence in Nevada.

"I have attended several of your lectures, Dr. Wu," Rebecca volunteered, very sure of herself. "And you, Miss Seng—naturally, I associate you with the Seng porcelains. It is an honor to welcome you to El Portal. I wish I could give you more time, but I am leaving for California. Mrs. Atlee informed me your visit was urgent, so I felt I must give you a few minutes—" She glanced at Ripley, inviting him to state what he wanted of her.

"I'll be very brief, Mrs. Jennifer. First, I wish you would send for Gar Chang, your cook; I want him to confirm the statement he made to me when I was here last."

Rebecca nodded her assent, and after she had gone to the door and spoken to the housekeeper, the tall man continued.

"You will recall," he said, "that I warned you it was a mistake to try to cover up for Kurt Von Roehm. I told you why you believed he was guilty, but you denied that anything of value had been removed from the house. At that time, I didn't know what had been taken. Since then, a tragic series of events has confirmed my contention, Mrs. Jennifer, and supplied my partner and me with all of the missing details."

"I can only reiterate what I told you on your last visit, Mr. Ripley," Rebecca declared with stubborn insistence. "Nothing was taken from this house."

BEFORE Rainbow could answer, Mrs. Atlee came with the cook. Gar Chang was obviously embarrassed to find himself in the presence of Mei-lang. She spoke to him in Chinese. The housekeeper moved toward the door.

"Don't go, Mrs. Atlee," said Rip. "I prefer you to hear this." He turned to Gar Chang. "Chang, you told me that from the window of your room you saw a man pass a white bag, possibly a pillow case, containing something that was handled very carefully, from one of the dining room balconies to a confederate on the ground outside, and that they then disappeared behind the stables. Was that the truth?"

"Yes, sir."

"That was on the night Mr. Jennifer was killed?"

Chang nodded and said yes.

"That's all," Rainbow told him, "unless Mrs. Jennifer desires to question you."

"I have no questions," Rebecca answered, quite unruffled. "My only observation is that on a dark night, from an upper window in the servants' wing, it would be rather difficult to determine whether it was a white bag or some other object that Chang saw." Her smile was vaguely pitying. "You like to be mysterious, Mr. Ripley. You bring this up as though to say there was something of great value in this alleged white bag. I trust you are not going to tell me it was the Seng porcelains. They are in the living room this moment, if you would care to see them."

"I'm sure they are there," Rainbow said. "You brought them in from Kurt's camp last night."

Rebecca's poise was not equal to dissembling her agitation at this. "Why, that is absurd!" she exclaimed, dismissing Chang. "What can I say to anything as fantastic as that?"

"Mrs. Jennifer, you went out to the camp yesterday morning. Blaine Wheeler followed you. He found you there with the vases in your possession. I believe you received a note, allegedly from Kurt, telling you where to find them. It confirmed all your fears and suspicions."

"No!" Mrs. Atlee burst out shrilly. "That's not true. The two vases have never been out of the living room! I've dusted them myself every day! I never permit the help to touch them!"

"Might I see them, just to be sure they are not facsimiles?" Dr. Wu inquired.

"Certainly," said Rebecca. "Take the doctor in, please."

Grumpy uncrossed his legs. "Rip, does the lady deny that she and Wheeler were at the camp yesterday mornin'?"

"Why should I deny it?" Rebecca answered him. "I have every right to go there, and so has Mr. Wheeler."

"Undoubtedly," Ripley agreed, "but hardly together. The camp burned to the ground last evening. We fished over the ashes for some time. Frankly, we expected to find a body."

"Mine?" Rebecca's tone was cold and mocking.

"I would have been less surprised if we had found Wheeler." Rainbow's tone was just as cold and blunt. Mei-lang was seated beside him. She touched his arm and got his attention.

"Mrs. Jennifer completely misunderstands the reason for this visit," she said. She turned to Rebecca. "We are not here just to break down your story. I know you will go to any length to protect the young man who is in jail. But you have been grossly deceived, Mrs. Jennifer; he is not guilty. If it is only his freedom you want, there is nothing we can do for you; but if you are interested in establishing his innocence, we are in a position to help you. Will you permit me to prove it?"

After a moment's hesitation, Rebecca said: "I don't know what you have to say, Miss Seng. I shall use my own judgment about it, but I am willing to listen."

"That is all I ask," Mei-lang replied. "On the afternoon of the 14th of this month, a man appeared at the shop of one of my countrymen, Sun Quang, in Dupont Street, in San Francisco, and offered the Seng porcelains for sale. The price was ar-

ranged, and the man was to return that evening to consummate the sale. In the meantime, Mr. Sun appealed to Dr. Wu to confirm his belief that the vases were authentic, though he had recognized them at once and told the man they were the pigeon's blood King-te-chen vases brought to this country by my father, and the only ones known to exist."

REBECCA had lost her look of sophisticated boredom. Her red mouth settled into a tense, straight line.

"Dr. Wu went to the shop with Mr. Sun. But the stranger did not return. Later that evening, I went to the Dupont-Street store with the doctor. We found Sun Quang lying on the floor, murdered. We felt very sure the man who had offered the Seng porcelains had killed him so he could not be traced. Dr. Wu went to Oakland in the morning and saw a suspicious-looking man board a train for Reno. That man, Mrs. Jennifer, was Blaine Wheeler, your district attorney."

Rebecca was stricken with amazement. She made no attempt to conceal it. Her deep, excited breathing was audible in the small room. She suddenly got to her feet and strode back and forth, a harried look in her dark, lustrous eyes.

"I needn't remind you," said Rip, "that Kurt was in jail in Star City on that day. He could hardly have been in Chinatown, in San Francisco."

Rebecca Jennifer turned to him distractedly. "Dare I trust you?" she demanded tensely.

"That's for you to say," the tall man replied soberly. "Would it help you to a decision if I were to tell you that Wheeler arranged the murder of Mr. Jennifer? He wasn't the actual killer; he waited on that little ridge several miles across the valley for his thugs to bring him the vases and word that they had done their job. As the county prosecutor, he believed he could fasten the crime on Kurt. The matter of the projected oil well suited his purpose perfectly. The porcelains were to be sold and the proceeds given to the three men who were in the crime with him. One of that trio was shot to death last night at Wagon Wheel, where he had gone in an attempt to snuff out the life of Dr. Wu."

Dr. Wu and Mrs. Atlee stepped in at that moment.

"They are the authentic Seng porcelains!" he exclaimed excitedly. "They are in perfect condition!"

No one was listening. Mei-lang had seen Rebecca reach out blindly to clutch the back of a chair to support herself, her face bloodless. She tried to reach her, but Mrs. Atlee rushed across the room and brushed her aside.

"Please, madame, sit here by the open window until I get some smelling salts!" the woman entreated. "This has been too much for you! These people must leave!"

Rebecca pushed away. "No," she said firmly, "I am beginning to understand the truth for the first time. Suddenly, it is all very plain to me!" She raised a faltering hand to her throbbing head. "This explains why Blaine was so insistent that all this land go with the house; it was to be his, part of the bargain, along with myself!"

"I'm afraid that's true," said Rainbow. "He had some very ambitious plans. It was only when he learned that Miss Seng and the doctor were here in Nevada that he realized his danger. Still believing he could save himself, he planted the vases in Kurt's camp and enticed you there to make some sort of a compromise. Are you ready to tell us what that bargain was, Mrs. Jennifer?"

"Yes," was the wooden answer. "Believing he had caught me redhanded, so to speak, I had to agree to what he proposed. He was contemptible enough to profess his great love for me; that because of it, nothing would be brought out about the porcelains, and on Friday, he would advise the court to release Kurt for lack of evidence. It would be sacrificing his career, he said. To compensate him for that, I was to probate the new will and eventually turn over El Portal to him."

Her tone was bitter with self-reproach and she shuddered, as though trying to throw off her torturing thoughts. Mrs Atlee, not knowing what had transpired in the few minutes she had been out of the room, could only say despairingly: "You are overwrought, madame! You don't know what you are saying!"

"No, Ida, I know what I'm doing!" Rebecca protested s t o u t l y. "I wouldn't have believed I could be such a fool!"

GRUMPY caught Rip's eye. They knew they had the evidence they needed.

"If I were you, I would postpone my trip to California," Rainbow suggested to Rebecca. "The next few days are going to be very important ones here."

"The trip was only an excuse," she admitted readily. "Are you in a position to gather in the men who have been Blaine Wheeler's confederates?"

"We know who they are, Mrs. Jennifer. Our first move will be to have Wheeler arrested."

"Just how will you proceed? Can the sheriff arrest him on his own authority, without a warrant?"

"He could, but if you will accompany us to town, we'll lay our facts before Judge Barrett. He can issue the warrant and impanel a jury to hand up an indictment. Once Wheeler is behind bars, the attorney general will have to appoint a special prosecutor to try him."

"If we show up in town together, Wheeler is going to smell a rat," Grumpy remarked dourly. "He'll know the jig is up, and if I guess right, he won't sit around waitin' for Cleve Baker to drop in and lead him off to jail."

"Cleve told me this morning that the court isn't sitting," said Rip. "He says the judge spends his mornings in the courthouse but can usually be found at his ranch north of town in the afternoon. We'll go there. In the meantime, you go into Star City. Look up Tim Bunker. Between the two of you, you ought to be able to keep an eye on Wheeler."

"How will I git to town?" the little one grumbled. "You'll need the rig."

"I'll provide a carriage," Rebecca offered. "When shall we start?"

"If we leave now, we'll be there at noon," said Rainbow. "That should be an excellent time to catch the judge."

He walked outside with Grumpy. "What seems to be wrong with you?" he inquired. "We've had better luck than we had a right to expect."

"I think yo're playin' it wrong, doin' any talkin' to a judge or goin' after Wheeler first!" The little one's tongue was sharp. "It'd make a lot more sense to me if we got the Jennifers and four or five good men and threw a circle around Frank Ruby's place and hog-tied the whole dang bunch, and then went out for Gartiez. It'd be time enough then to nail Wheeler. The way yo're playin' it, we'll have to shoot this out with that gang. They'll run the second they hear that Wheeler's been tripped up. Most likely they're jittery right now and keepin' someone in town to git word to 'em."

"You needn't blow off like that," Rip retorted. "I agree with every word of it, but we just can't play it that way this time. We wouldn't have the law riding with us. Where would we be if we brought that bunch in and Judge Barrett referred the whole matter to the attorney general? We couldn't hold them or Wheeler."

"I don't know what kind of a judge he can be if he refuses to act!" Grumpy snorted.

"I have no reason to believe he won't," said Rainbow, "but we're going to be sure of it before we make a move. That way, we'll have Cleve riding with us, and what we do will have the backing of the law. You get going now!"

CHAPTER XVI

Wanted for Murder

JUDGE Amos Barrett was at home. He invited his unexpected visitors into the parlor.

When Ripley informed him they were there to discuss Wheeler's connection with the Jennifer case, he failed completely to grasp what was to follow.

"I've had Blaine under my wing a long time," he said, with pride. "Before he went off to the University, I let him come into my office and read law. Even after he had been admitted to the bar I helped him to make both ends meet till he could get on his feet. I've always had a lot of faith in Blaine; I know he'll go a long way."

"Hearing you say that, Judge, is not going to make it any easier for me to tell you what's on my mind," Rainbow declared uneasily. "My purpose in coming to you is to have a warrant issued against Wheeler, charging him with the murder of Henry Jennifer."

"What!" the elderly judge cried. He stared aghast at his visitors. "Is this some ghastly bit of humor, Mr. Ripley?"

"Unfortunately, it only half states the crimes he has committed. If you will be patient with me, I shall start at the beginning and give you the facts."

From the night in Reno, when they had rescued Opal Charlie from Rapp and Gartiez, up to the events of the morning at El Portal, he drew a complete and detailed picture of Blaine Wheeler's activities. Amos Barrett was at first overwhelmed and then outraged at his misplaced confidence and friendship for the man.

"I can't even attempt to defend him!" he groaned. "I always admired his ambition, but this is where it's led him! " He called in his wife and told her he was going to town at once. "I'll get dinner there; don't wait for me."

"I should like to send Mrs. Jennifer back to El Portal, and Miss Seng and the Doctor to the Wagon Wheel," Rip told him, as they stepped out on the porch. "I don't feel it is safe to let them go alone."

"Nor I!" the judge declared sharply. "I'll ask my son to see them safely home. As soon as we reach town, I'll have the sheriff place Blaine under arrest; the papers are only a formality. But I will take care of that and also issue warrants on the persons of Frank Ruby and Joe Gartiez."

"We want Ruby's crew, too, Judge. If they were not participants in the crime, they certainly were accessories after the fact. I wish you would hand Baker John Doe warrants for all of them."

Barrett nodded grimly. "Let's not waste any time here. I'm glad you had the foresight to set your partner to watching the courthouse."

Ripley spoke briefly to Mei-lang and Mrs. Jennifer. The judge drove up then and they sped toward Star City. Grumpy popped out of a saloon from which he had been watching the courthouse entrance when he saw them turning into the hitch racks that lined the main street.

"He's been up in his office for an hour," the little one told them. "Bunker's around in back watching the rear door."

"We'll get the sheriff," Judge Barrett said.

CLEVE BAKER came out of the little restaurant across from his office at that moment and saw them. Rip beckoned.

"We were just starting to look for you," the judge told Baker. Without any preamble, he disclosed why they were there.

Cleve's eyes widened until they seemed about to pop. "Holy Christopher!" he moaned. Suddenly, then, he was no longer surprised. "It had to be this way! But I thought Wheeler was only a fool."

They crossed the street and mounted the courthouse steps. A minute later they were on the second floor. Judge Barrett refused to listen to Rainbow's plea to permit Cleve and himself to enter the office first. Instead, he flung back the door and marched in boldly. There was no one in the outer office.

"Not back from their noon hour yet," the judge snapped. Wheeler's door was closed. He pushed it open without ceremony. There was no one there. Desk drawers had been pulled

out, as though in frantic haste. Papers littered the floor.

"Jest what I told you!" Grumpy rapped. "That snake got out of here some way!" He flung up a window and called to Tim. The reporter came in panting a moment later. He got the signs of flight, too.

"Wheeler didn't sneak out the back door!" he declared positively.

"No, I don't suppose he did," said Cleve. "Chances are he used the covered passageway to the jail. I've got a key. Let's try it!"

The passage from the courthouse to the county jail, through which prisoners were conducted, was only fifty feet in length. Baker hurried the partners, Bunker and the judge through it and then ran out in front to his office. Hank Stauffer, the deputy, was there.

"Have you seen anything of Wheeler?"

"Yeh, he came over from the courthouse just after you went out to eat," Stauffer answered. "Came through the passage. My horse was out in front. He asked me if he could borrow it for a few minutes, and I would bring it around to the alley, 'cause he was on private business and didn't want to be seen. He ain't come back—"

"He won't be back!" Baker burst out furiously. He turned to the partners shaking his head disgustedly. "I don't suppose we can blame Hank; he didn't know what was up. You can bet your bottom dollar Wheeler's half-way across Blue Valley by now and making tracks for the Rose Creek hills!"

Rainbow nodded glumly. "I guess that's the way of it. We'll have to go after him. He'll make for Ruby's place."

"Take men enough with you to leave nothing to chance," Judge Barrett said crisply. "I authorize you to deputize as many as you think you'll need, Baker. I'll sign some warrants."

"We'll need men who are familiar with the desert," Rip told Cleve. "I wish you'd pick them from the Wagon Wheel crew. We can get some more good men at Martin's ranch."

"All right," the sheriff agreed. "If you boys haven't had anything to eat this noon, get something quickly. I'll get up some broncs for us."

"How about me, Baker?" Tim Bunker inquired. "Can I ride with you?"

Cleve caught Rip's nod and said yes. "Hank, you come with me," he continued. "You can give me a hand with the horses. We ought to be in front of the courthouse in about twenty minutes."

He and the deputy hurried away to the barn. The partners, Bunker and the judge turned down the street.

"It won't take you long to sign the papers, Judge," Rainbow stated. "I wish you'd take a minute to drop into the bank and see if Wheeler has closed out his account. I don't believe there's much doubt about it, but it's worth being certain. If he's got money, he'll run a long piece."

BARRETT saw the wisdom of getting the information. He was in the bank only a minute or two when he came out with word that the district attorney had withdrawn almost every dollar he had on deposit. "About two thousand dollars, Ripley. That'll be enough to take them a long way."

Rip nodded. "It will, if they get much of a start."

With Grumpy and Bunker he entered the restaurant Baker patronized and asked to be served at once. When they came out, Cleve and Stauffer were waiting before the courthouse with the judge. The latter handed his bronc to Rainbow.

"If we're all set," the sheriff said, "let's go!" He jerked a parting nod to Judge Barrett and Stauffer. "We'll see you when we get back!"

At the Wagon Wheel, the Jennifers and Mei-lang were not surprised when the partners rode in with Baker and Tim.

"We felt sure you'd be showing up soon," Bill told them. "When Miss Seng got back with news of what you'd told the judge, we knew the showdown had come. Do you want Ted and me to go with you, Cleve?"

"If you will. And I'd like to have

Clane and Flick and—Cross Birmingham. We'll pick up another man or two at Martin's ranch."

"You can get all the men you'll need right here," Bill returned sharply.

"We can't leave Martin out of this," said Rip. "He's more familiar with Ruby's layout than any of us. Let's not waste any more time here than we have to."

Bill turned away muttering to himself.

"He'll be all right, once we get started," Ted whispered to Rip before he followed his brother down the yard to the bunkhouse.

Mei-lang was on the gallery. The tall man rode over to her. She only half listened as he told how Wheeler had slipped away from town. Grumpy came out of the house carrying two rifles and a bag of cartridges.

"I recognize this moment, Rainbow," she said soberly, her anxiety for him too plain to be misunderstood; "this is not the first time I have seen these preparations being made. It would be foolish to ask you to be careful. But you must come riding back to me unharmed. I'll hold that thought and no other till I see you again."

Rip studied her face for a moment. "You'll not leave before I return? Promise me!"

"I couldn't go until I know this is over and you are safe."

His hand closed over hers for a second before he rode down the yard to join the others. They left in a few minutes and were soon just a tiny dust-cloud moving across the valley.

Without encountering anyone on the Furnace Creek road, they reached Martin Jennifer's ranch. Martin came out of the house with Joe Pixley, his foreman. The lines in his stern face deepened as he saw both Ted and Bill there, as well as three of their men.

Flick gave him a stony stare. Martin had once ordered the faithful McGinnis off his range at gun point and threatened to shoot him on sight if he ever trespassed again.

Rip and Baker quickly made their errand known.

"If you and Pixley will come with us, we'll have men enough," the latter stated. "We'll surround Ruby's house. If we can snag Wheeler there, we'll go after Gartiez, then."

"If you hope to surprise them," said Martin, "you want to quit the road right here. We'll cut over my range and get up into the scrub timber before we cross the creek. Just let us get a couple of rifles and we'll be ready."

THOUGH they were now eleven strong, they rode warily and finally began moving down the draw where Frenchy Jeanette had jumped the partners on their first attempt to reconnoitre Ruby's horse ranch. They soon came in sight of the house. Rip and Baker exchanged a word and ordered a halt. They could see horses in two of the corrals, but caught no glimpse of Ruby or any of his crew.

"Looks suspicious to me," Grumpy muttered. "Them broncs in the corrals is just unbroken, rough stuff; I don't see no saddle stock. Chances are the whole gang of 'em has pulled out!"

"We'll have a good look before we close in," Rainbow returned. "They may be forted up in that house and just waiting to start blazing away the second we show ourselves."

Fifteen minutes passed without any sign of life in the yard.

"We'll throw a circle around it and come in from all sides," Baker told them. "You come with me, Bill; and Clane, Flick and Cross. I'll leave the rest with you, Rip. Give us ten minutes to get in position."

Rainbow timed them carefully, and when he gave the signal for his force to close in, Baker and the others were moving forward, too. No one opposed them; the expected shots from the windows failed to materialize. Martin and Grumpy reached the kitchen door together and went through the house.

"They've gone, jest as I figgered!" the little man announced from the doorway. Rainbow had stepped down from his saddle and was examining some red stains on the grass. The others gathered around him.

"Looks like blood," said Bill.

"It is blood," Rip concurred. "Any signs of trouble in the house, Grump?"

"There's a wet patch on the kitchen floor. I figgered somebody had upset the water bucket. Let's have a look at it."

It required only the most cursory examination to convince them that with water and a broom someone had hastily endeavored to erase a heavy bloodstain from the floor. With the point of his knife Clane Goodnight dug a flattened slug from a .44 out of the wall. Martin found another.

"Can't be any question but they had a gun-fight here, Rip," said Baker. The tall man nodded.

"They had a row, all right. It's my guess that somebody was killed in this kitchen—either Ruby or Wheeler—and the body dragged outside and carried away."

"What makes you think it might have been Ruby?" Ted Jennifer asked. "This bunch would stick with him against Wheeler. They certainly couldn't have had any use for Blaine; he failed to come through with the money and the protection he promised. I believe the truth is that when he got here with word that the jig was up they just gave him the works."

"I don't know about that," Rainbow demurred. "The argument may have taken quite a different slant. I imagine Ruby had got to the point where he didn't have faith in anything the man told him. All he has is right here; he might not have been inclined to turn his back on it and run just because Wheeler was in a panic. It's something we ought to be sure about before we pull away. Very likely the body was just dumped into some ravine."

"Okay," Baker agreed. "If you think it's worth wasting the time to look for it, we'll do it. But I want to tell you men to keep your eyes peeled; that crowd may not be too far away. They certainly wouldn't have bothered to wash out that pool of blood if they didn't have some intention of showing up here again."

RAINBOW found it sound logic. He glanced at Tim Bunker out in the yard. The latter's face had a tense, drawn look.

"You wanted to come," Rip said to him.

"Sure!" Tim managed a grin. "But if you don't mind, I'm going to stick close to you."

They searched the surrounding hills and flats for an hour without discovering any trace of the dead man. Rip was forced to admit that it was idle to remain there any longer. Cleve and he walked aside and discussed their next move.

"There's nothing to do but take a gamble on which way they went and hope to Heaven we guess right," said Ripley. "They may have been pretty close till we showed up, but they're a long way ahead of us now. What's your guess, Cleve?"

"The Black Rock, of course. But that could be just a trick to draw us out there and give them a chance to double back and head south toward Reno. I asked the judge to wire Reno police to be on the lookout for them. You might say it's just one chance in a hundred that they'll go that way, but that's the very reason they may take it."

"That's true," Rainbow acknowledged. "But there's a reason why they won't head south. Gartiez is surely with them; he knows he'd be spotted around Reno. My guess is they'll head out into the Black Rock and keep moving until a sandstorm blows up and wipes out their trail. They'll scatter then and try to get across the stateline into California, Oregon or Idaho."

"You won't find any of them cutting back to California; it's too far, and they'd surely be seen." Baker spoke confidently. "It'll be Oregon or Idaho they'll head for. Nothing in that direction but sparsely settled ranch country. I saw you studying the county map in my office. Do you remember how the Pine Forest Mountains run down from Oregon?"

"Yeh—"

"Well, when they leave the Black Rock, they'll either drift up through those mountains or try to get

through Pueblo Valley, just to the east. There's at least seven of them. I agree with you they'll scatter when they come off the Black Rock."

Ripley studied him for a moment. "This is leading up to something, Cleve. What is it?"

"Just that I think our chances will be better if we don't attempt to chase them. Instead, we can cross the eastern fringe of the Wagon Wheel and a couple ranches to the north and reach the Pine Forest Mountains in time to grab the whole bunch."

"Or miss them all, if our calculations are wrong." The tall man shook his head gravely. "It's a long chance to take! But we better risk it. Can we depend on Goodnight to get us there quickly?"

"He knows every inch of the country. It'll be an all-night ride."

"All right," said Rip. "If there's any grub here, we'll take it along with us."

They were on their way presently. It was midnight before they stopped to eat. Tim Bunker cast a piteous glance at Rainbow. "I can't get down," he moaned. "My legs are paralyzed!"

THE tall man laughed and gave him a hand. "You asked for this, Tim. Walk around a little; get your circulation started."

With the dawn wind in their faces, they saw the almost treeless Pine Forest Range bulking ahead of them. Goodnight led them up a devious trail to a point from which Rainbow was able to scan the country to the south. He used his glasses for some minutes before he was satisfied that nothing moved out there.

"If they're coming this way, we're evidently here in time," he said. "The rest of you turn in and get some sleep."

Grumpy pillowed his head on his saddle and slept for several hours. "You hand me the glasses and curl up for a bit," he told Rainbow. "Looks like it's beginnin' to blow out there. That ought to chase 'em out."

There was nothing in his tone to suggest that he was pessimistic about their chances of success. It surprised Ripley, and he said: "By this time I figured you'd be yammering that we'd made a mistake in coming here."

"No, it was the smart thing to do," the little one averred. "I don't like to put all my eggs in one basket, but this was a chance we had to take."

By noon, he had changed his tune. The others were also beginning to doubt the wisdom of the move they'd made. Out on the Black Rock the sand-filled sky was a dirty gray. The afternoon wore on, and still the quarry failed to appear.

"Looks like we guessed wrong," Cleve declared gloomily. "They must have gone east toward Winnemucca. If we—"

"Wait!" Ripley interrupted. "Someone coming now! One, two, three—seven of them!"

"Wheeler with them?" Bill Jennifer jerked out.

"It'll be a few minutes before I can tell," Rainbow muttered in reply. The others had frozen to attention. The seconds ticked away.

"Well?" Bill demanded tensely.

"It's Ruby and Gartiez," the tall man said slowly. "They're heading this way with Frenchy Jeanette; the others are swinging off to go up the valley. Wheeler isn't with them!"

CHAPTER XVII

The Strong and the Brave

THEY watched Ruby and the others for a minute or two.

"There's no doubt about what their plans are," Cleve declared. "One bunch is going to strike right up the valley; Ruby and the pair with him are coming this way and going to take to the mountains."

"The three of them will pass pretty close to us, I reckon," said Goodnight. "Ruby knows this range and where he can find water. There's some springs north of us about a mile. Hopp Springs they call 'em. I imagine that's where he'll line out for first."

It sounded reasonable to the partners.

"They ain't likely to come over

this ridge," the little one pointed out. "If we drop down to our right and lay out in the rocks, they'll walk right into us and we can snag 'em without any trouble."

Baker had never faced a similar situation, but he kept his head. "We'll have to divide up," he said. "I'll take five men with me and go after that bunch moving up the valley; you take charge here, Rip. Pick your men."

"Grump, Martin, Bill and Bunker will be okay. That'll give you the younger men. I figure that might be best if it turns into a long chase. Just be careful not to show yourselves until you're sure Ruby can't turn back and join up with the rest."

They discussed it briefly. They mounted, then, and Cleve and his party crossed the ridge and were soon out of sight.

"I guess we better be moving, too," said Rip. "We want these men alive if possible. I don't know how tough Frenchy Jeanette will turn out to be, but I can assure you Ruby and Gartiez won't give up without a fight."

They dropped down from the ridge and concealed themselves in the rocks. Ripley disposed them so that they could pocket the three men.

"When they show up, do we play this on our own?" Bill asked.

"We'll muss it up for shore if we do," the little one grumbled. "You flag 'em, Rip. We'll have 'em covered. If they don't stand, then it'll be every man for himself till we've got 'em treed."

"That's all right, if we understand it," Rainbow agreed. He turned back and took up a position that put Bunker in between Grumpy and himself. Tim grinned nervously.

"I'm as tight as a drum," he admitted. "If a rabbit jumped out of the brush in back of me it would scare me to death."

"Just take it easy," Rip advised. "You'll be okay."

For the next ten minutes they could see nothing of Ruby and his companions. They heard the horses coming then, and a few seconds later the three men rode into view, traveling in single file. Ruby was in the lead; Gartiez brought up the rear. They betrayed no sign of suspicion. Apparently, they were about to ride into the trap, when Ruby suddenly veered off to his left and started up the ridge, the others following him, their direction taking them to the very spot the posse had just left.

Rainbow realized instantly that he and his men were certain to be discovered and caught at a terrible disadvantage if the three reached the crest. They were less than a hundred yards away now. The folly of calling on them to surrender was so obvious that Rip didn't give it a second thought. Flinging his rifle to his shoulder, he snapped a warning shot at Ruby, and calling to Grumpy to follow him, raced up the ridge in a desperate attempt to reach the crest ahead of them. They were successful, but only by seconds.

RUBY and Gartiez came charging up at them, their guns spitting fire. Down below the Jennifers and Bunker had swung out around the rocks with the double intention of blocking escape in that direction and attacking from the rear.

Grumpy slapped two slugs into Gartiez that lifted him out of his saddle and sent his rifle flying. Determined to take Ruby alive, Rip risked destruction to stitch a pattern of slugs around him that drove the red-haired man down the slope.

Frenchy Jeanette had flung himself from his saddle and was shooting from behind the protection of an outcropping. Ruby quickly joined him there, only to have Martin and Bill Jennifer catch them in a crossfire. When Rip and the little one began to move in, Jeanette threw his gun away and held up his hands in surrender. Ruby fought on until a slug ricocheted off the ledge behind which he was concealed and struck him on the jaw with force enough to knock him cold.

"Looks like we got them!" Rip called down the slope to Martin and the others.

Grumpy gathered up Jeanette's

rifle and searched him for other weapons.

"Too bad I didn't bust you gents the first time I laid eyes on you!" Frenchy snarled.

"You know why you didn't try it, you yellow-livered skunk! Back away from that bronc! Don't fool yorself with any ideas like that, Jeanette!"

Ripley had begun to go through Ruby's pockets; he knew the man was only stunned. "Look, Grump!" he called, holding up a red-leather wallet. "It's Wheeler's dough!"

Bill and Martin had come up.

"Pretty hot there for a minute or two," the former muttered. "They crossed us up for fair, turning this way."

"Where's Bunker?" Rainbow demanded anxiously.

"He got clipped in the leg a little. Nothing serious. He's trying to tie it up." Bill walked around Rainbow and stared at Ruby. "Is that man dead, Rip?"

"No, a spent slug smashed his jaw; that's about all that's wrong with him. Gartiez—"

"Look out!" Grumpy yelled.

When Gartiez had pitched out of his saddle, he had rolled into a clump of juniper bushes, where, after a convulsive shudder, he lay without moving. Grumpy believed he had killed the man. Rip was of the same opinion.

But Spanish Joe was far from dead. There was plenty of tough fibre in him, and though he was seriously wounded, he managed to get his .45 out of the holster without attracting attention. When Bill stepped around Rainbow, Gartiez had an easy target. With all the strength left in him, he raised the heavy six-gun.

Martin Jennifer had caught the movement in the bushes at the same moment Grumpy cried his warning. With a curse, he flexed his legs and hurled himself through the air at Gartiez. The gun coughed as Martin crashed down on the man. Bill ran up and kicked the weapon out of Joe's weakening grip. He started to lift Martin.

"Where did he get you?" he demanded, his voice rough with emotion.

"My right arm is burning like hell," Martin growled. "I guess the slug must have ripped right through.

Grumpy and Bill tore his shirt off and examined the wound.

"Didn't bust any bones," the little one announced. "I'll git a little chewin' tobacco and bind it up. Rip and I didn't think there was a shiver left in Gartiez!"

"Looks like there won't be if we don't get him to a doctor in a hurry," said Rainbow.

Tim came limping up the slope, leading his horse. "I saw Baker and the boys coming back. They've got that gang with them."

NOW that the fight was over, Bunker's excitement was as great as ever, but for quite another reason. "Where can I hire somebody to drive me to town in a hurry? I want to have my story on the wire before the news breaks."

"The nearest ranch is Milt Taylor's Cross T," Bill told him. "He'd drive you in if you'll pay him his price. But it'll be dark before you get there. You might wander around all night."

"We'll be getting away from here soon," said Rip. "You go as far as Taylor's place with us."

The gaunt, red-headed Ruby was stirring to consciousness. Rip tried to question him and got only a grunt for his pains. He had better luck with Frenchy Jeanette.

"If you'll talk, you can save your own skin," Rainbow told him.

"Why should I?" Frenchy flared back. "You guys ain't got nothin' on me. I didn't have anythin' to do with killin' old man Jennifer. I didn't even know it was comin' off."

"But you knew all about after it happened and kept it a secret. The law will hold you guilty on that count. If you get a minute, you'll get twenty years."

Jeanette dismissed him with a contemptuous gesture, but a few minutes later, he said: "What do you want to know, Ripley?"

"Who was the actual killer? I know two men went to El Portal that night. One remained outside."

"It was Joe; Ruby went with him. They got them vases, and met Wheeler and handed them over to him."

"Where did Pete Rapp figure in it?"

"Pete wasn't in on it. When Frank and Joe got back to the ranch, they got rowin' between themselves and spilled the works to all of us. Gartiez was afraid he might be suspected; he wanted to go back to Reno. Frank finally gave him fifty dollars, and when Joe pulled away, Pete went with him."

What Frenchy had to say about the death of Opal Charlie confirmed the partners' theory.

"Did you ever take any money from Wheeler?" the tall man asked

"Not a dime! He never came through to Frank or anybody else!" Frenchy's piercing black eyes narrowed to slits of hatred. "Ruby was a sucker for ever havin' anythin' to do with that rotten, double-crossin' punk! Wheeler was goin' to give him dough enough so he could go to Arizona and cure his consumption! I don't blame Frank for blowin' his head off! If he hadn't, some of us would have done it for him!"

"Wheeler ought to thank him for it," Grumpy growled. "It ended his troubles in a hurry....What did you do with the body?"

Jeanette hesitated and finally put a question to Ripley. "We all had a hand in gettin' rid of it. Can that be used against me?"

"Certainly! The way to stop that is to tell us where we can find the body."

"We buried it in the ashes of Von Roehm's camp," was the sullen answer.

The irony of it struck Tim Bunker, "That," he said, "is what is often mistakenly referred to as poetic justice."

RAINBOW was still questioning Jeanette, when Baker and the rest of the posse swung around the ridge with their prisoners. One of the latter had a blood-stained rag wrapped around his head. The others, including the possemen, seemed to have come through unmarked. Cleve left them at the bottom of the slope and came up to the partners.

"They didn't put up much of a fight," he said. "Looks like that wasn't the case here." He walked over to Gartiez. "He's in tough shape, Rip."

"Yeh, you'll have to get him in quickly. Ruby needs a doctor, too. I got the whole story out of Jeanette." Briefly he acquainted Baker with what he had learned.

"That checks with the way you had it figured out," Cleve remarked. "To sew it up like that shows me I've got a lot to learn. The thing to do now is to pack Gartiez on a horse and get him to Milt Taylor's place. I can put him on a wagon there. If we're not more than four hours getting to the Cross T, we should be in town by daylight."

"You won't need all of us to get your prisoners in. If it's okay with you, Grump and I will take Martin and Bill with us and cut down across the Black Rock to the camp and try to find Wheeler's body. If we locate it, we'll leave it there until you can get out."

That arrangement was made, and by dark, the partners and the two Jennifers were far down the desert. It was after twelve when they reached their destination. They found the body carelessly buried in the ashes, as Jeanette had told them.

"That's a fine way for a man to end up," Martin declared with unconscious commiseration. "Pitched into a hole in the ground like a stray cur! The high and mighty Blaine Wheeler! Old Amos Barrett will feel this; he always held Wheeler up to everybody as a shining example of what a man could make of himself if he only had some guts and gumption."

There was no reason for them to remain there long. They came across the Double Diamond and reached the house with the sky already pink with dawn.

"You might stop and have breakfast with me," Martin said. "Unless

you figure it might poison you." This last was intended for Bill, and it bore strange fruit. Without saying a word, Bill got down and put his horse at the rack. There was a look almost of shy embarrassment on his unshaven face when he turned to Martin.

"We've been idiots long enough," he said haltingly. "If I tried to thank you for saving my life last evening, the words wouldn't come to me, Martin. The old man is gone now, and we're not kids anymore. I think it's time we buried the hatchet. . . . Will you shake hands with me?"

"Well, sure, if that's the way you feel, Bill." Martin was embarrassed, too. "I—I reckon we have been kinda pig-headed."

He routed out his cook and got a fire going in the kitchen. While they waited for breakfast, Rip succeeded in getting him to consent to having his arm dressed. Martin got a bottle of creosote dip that he used on his stock.

"Wash the wound and put some of that on it, Ripley; it's as good as anything a doctor can do for you."

The cooking was good, and they were ravenous. They sat at the table after they finished.

Bill straightened. "You boys won't be leaving right away, will you?"

"With the evidence Baker's got, he can convict Ruby and Gartiez," Rainbow replied. "How guilty the others are is a question. We couldn't help him any by staying. Grump and I haven't talked it over, but we may go down to San Francisco for a few days."

The little man shook his head at once. He knew what was behind this talk of San Francisco. "That wouldn't appeal to me. I got business in Wyoming."

RAINBOW understood him. He gave him a frowning glance. "What business have you got back home that can't be postponed?"

"The Cheyenne Frontier Day Celebration! I ain't goin' to miss it ag'in this year!"

Rip had less than usual to say as they cut across Blue Valley. In the distance, a buckboard moved along the road in the direction of Star City. Grumpy called his attention to it.

"Do you suppose that's Bunker?"

"No, I imagine Tim reached town a couple hours ago," the tall man returned without interest.

When they rode into the yard, they saw a woman seated on the gallery. Rip turned that way, thinking it was Mei-lang. He was on the gallery steps before he saw it was Rebecca who sat there. The rangey-looking sorrel at the rack belonged to her.

"I know you are surprised to see me here," she said. "The news Mr. Bunker brought down the valley at daybreak helped me to several decisions. . . . Would you ask Mr. Jennifer to come over?"

Bill and Grumpy were riding toward the corrals when Rainbow caught up with him.

"It's Mrs. Jennifer. Bunker passed here at daybreak with the news. She says she's made a decision about something. She wants to talk with you." Bill's face darkened with hos-

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tility. "She came through for us day before yesterday," Riley added. "You owe her a little consideration."

"I don't know what she can have to say to me, but I'll listen," was the reluctant answer. "You boys come along."

Rebecca's air of detachment, which usually served her so well, was missing this morning. "I'll not pretend I'm welcome at Wagon Wheel, Mr. Jennifer," she began. "But as I told Mr. Ripley, I reached several decisions, and they concern you and your brother. I do not intend to remain in Nevada. The furnishings at El Portal belong to me. I will have them shipped to California as soon as they can be packed. I don't believe anything can be done with the house. Even if it could be sold, I don't believe that would interest me. I want it torn down, so there will be nothing left to remind anyone of its unhappy existence. You are familiar with the new will your father made giving me the land south of the creek. I am fairly acquainted with what it is worth. But I don't want it, Mr. Jennifer; I never urged your father to give it to me. It was Blaine Wheeler's idea."

Bill nodded. "I understood that. Just what is it you want Ted and me to do?"

"I want you to agree to tear down El Portal. In return, I'll destroy the new will. If you will have your lawyer draw up the necessary papers I will sign them."

It shook Bill, and he fumbled for a moment over what to say. "I hadn't expected to be treated so generously," he got out stiffly. "We need that range. In fact, I don't know what we'd do without it. As for the house, I agree with you that the best thing is to tear it down. Maybe it will help all of us to forget."

Rebecca got up. "When can I expect Mr. Langworth?"

"I'll ask him to come up tomorrow, if that's convenient."

Rebecca nodded and wished them good-morning. She was an excellent horsewoman, and she mounted gracefully and rode away, a proud, somehow lonely figure.

"Strange woman," Grumpy muttered. "I don't know how a man could ever hope to understand her."

Bill shook his head. "It'll take me some time to get this straight. I'll take care of your horses. We'll get a little sleep then."

It was a few minutes after eight already. Mei-lang was usually down by that time. Rip looked in the dining room. Old Cozy came in from the kitchen at that moment.

"I was just looking for Miss Seng and the doctor," Rainbow told him. "When they come down, tell them we're back."

"Why, they was down long ago!" Cozy exclaimed. "Miss Seng talked to that newspaper feller. That musta bin two hours ago. She had some toast and tea and then asked me to get somebody to drive her and the doctor to town in time to catch the Reno train. There's a letter there on the table she left for you."

Rip picked up the letter and carried it upstairs. His gray eyes were bleak.

"Bunker told her it was all over; that we were all right," he got out forlornly. "She said she couldn't go until she knew the fight was over and I was safe." He shook his head dully. "That must have been them in the rig we saw when we were coming across the valley."

"Wal, you got to see it from her angle, too," the little one declared weightily. "I remember the last time you said good-bye and what it did to you. I reckon it's even tougher on her....You could read the letter."

The tall man broke the seal and read the few tender words of farewell. He crumpled the letter in his hand. His face was rocky as he turned away. "This is the bravest thing she ever did, she says!"

"Mebbe it is," Grumpy muttered. "One of you has got to have some sense. You can't follow her down to 'Frisco, Rip."

"No, I'd be mad to do it." Carefully Rainbow smoothed out the letter and placed it in his wallet. "When we get to Reno, we better buy two tickets for Cheyenne."

THE END

"Don't forget I brought in Red Dorgan," Pop.

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(Continued From Page 91)

they can go with yuh on this scout. This here Gordo canyon ain't been scouted at all yet, and it's a natural line of escape for them murderin' outlaws. If you was to run into 'em and they ganged up on you. . ."

Clint Abbott grinned patronizingly. "I can take care of myself, Pop," he cut in. "Reckon I proved that when I brought in Red Dorgan. If I spot that one-eyed half-breed, this man hunt will be over, pronto."

Pop looked up quickly, his face gone suddenly stern. "This is no time for playin' like a story book hero. Villon's outfit's tough—toughest I seen in thirty years." He swiveled his lean, gray head, spat a stream of tobacco juice down onto the hot rimrock. "You're my deputy, son, and I'm givin' the orders here. I don't aim to see you massacred," he ended, his voice gone a bit mild, suddenly.

Clint sat looking at the old man in surprise for a moment; Pop Peters had never spoken to him in this tone before.

Neither of them said anything for a time. Then, Pop said, "Clint, you're just like my own son, even if you don't wear my name. Ever since you came to live with me after them Apaches wiped out your real father and mother, I've looked on you like you was my own flesh and blood. But it's time you learned something.

"You're good with them two guns of your'n, sure you are. And I'm proud of you. But you ain't no match for three danged good gun-slingin' outlaws; you ain't goin' to scout Gordo canyon alone, and that's that."

Clint Abbott stared for a moment, his face getting red. A scowl gathered in his blue eyes. He suddenly wheeled his roan, started down Gordo canyon. "Hell with you," he growled, over his shoulder. "I'll show you if I'm a story book hero. Nobody treats me like I was a kid; not even you, Pop. Fire me if you like; I'm scoutin' this canyon alone."

"Come back, son. Come back here," old Pop yelled. "You'll get yoreself killed." Then, as Clint stubbornly kept on moving down grade, the old man called, "If you don't come back in a half hour, I'm comin' down there lookin' for you."

Clint growled under his breath, touched his gelding with spurs. The animal leaped on down the slope, cut in among the big pines and mesquite, was quickly out of sight of old Pop. "Huh," Clint muttered. "Pop thinks I'm nothin' but a kid, don't seem to know I've growed up. I'll show 'im. If I meet up with this danged half-breed I'll pull a few tricks with a six-gun he never heard of."

CLINT had gone about a mile, and was nearing the desert. He had cut no sign, had seen nothing suspicious and was commencing to relax a bit. He was still growling and muttering to himself when suddenly his big roan threw up his head, nickered loudly.

Clint pulled up sharply, wheeled the big horse behind a clump of mesquite. His hands dropped to his twin guns and his eyes searched the brush carefully. It was then that he spotted a strongly built, well-hidden log cabin, about two hundred yards on down the canyon. "Must be strange horses near," Clint thought. "The roan never would have called if there wasn't." He stiffened in the saddle for a moment. "Might be that danged One-Eye Villon. This is the only spot that ain't been scouted before."

Already, since Pop Peters had made him deputy, experience had taught Clint that a man lived longer if he didn't go charging up and down trails recklessly, and busting up to strange houses like a pilgrim. So he studied the shack with care, from this safe distance.

A hidden gun in the cabin would pack all the aces against a mounted man outside and a little caution might pay big returns. And especially so, since One-Eye Villon and his tough bunch of gun slicks were, right now, concentrating on a quick get-away up through these hills, with a big sack of coin from the Hondo Bank, which they had knocked over that morning.

Old Charlie Reed, cashier of the bank, had been brutally and unnecessarily murdered in that stick-up and every man in Hondo was in the hills, hot to get the killers. Every out where a horse could travel was

(Continued On Page 94)

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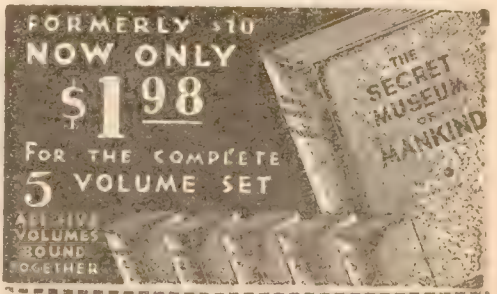

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(Continued From Page 93)

blocked by the big posse. The desert between the Lobo Mountains and Hondo, ten miles to the east was closely patrolled.

Clint pushed his big cream-colored Stetson back off his black head and unconsciously his broad lean shoulders went back, his square fighting jaw thrust out. It never occurred to him to doubt his ability to corral Villon.

The shack that had halted Clint didn't look as if it had been used for years. The door yawned half open before a black interior. But Clint wasn't satisfied. He started to knee his horse forward, then changed his mind and turned him off and pushed deep into a clump of jack pines before sliding to the ground.

Clint drew his six-guns and started toward the cabin on foot. He couldn't rid his mind of a feeling that there was something wrong here. Doubt began to assail his ordinarily cocksure mind. There were three mighty tough hombres in that gang. Maybe it would have been better after all, to have taken Pop Peters' advice to bring some of the posse with him on this scout, but it was too late to back out now. Folks would laugh at him, running for help, maybe. He couldn't stand that.

Every tree, every rock, he used carefully in his sneak toward the cabin. No Apache could have taken better advantage of the cover.

At last Clint was at the edge of the small clearing about the shack. The more he studied the well-hidden cabin ahead of him, the more worried he became. Not for himself, did he worry; he figured that he could just about take care of himself in any sort of situation. There wasn't a wild one in the state of Arizona that he couldn't whip—guns or fists, he bragged.

But against his will, his mind went back to the trap that Red Kilgore, Pop Peters' deputy before him, had walked into—Red's body found in front of the door of an old line shack out on Lonely Apache Butte, riddled with slugs. Of course, nothing like that could ever happen to him.

(Continued On Page 96)

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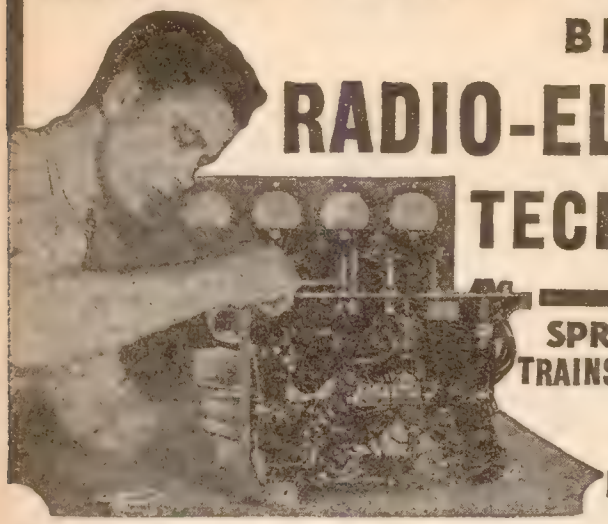

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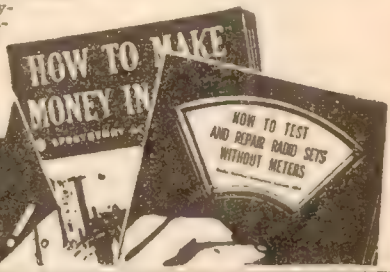

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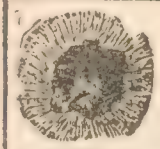

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(Continued From Page 94)

He was too smart, too handy with his two forty-fives, thonged low on his muscular thighs.

NO, FOR himself he didn't worry. But Sheriff Pop Peters was old. He'd been a mighty good law man in his day, but that day was past. He was too old now, too danged cautious to fit in with Clint's idea of a hard-shooting, hard-riding law man.

And Pop had yelled to him as he headed down Gordo canyon on his lone scout, "If you don't come back in half an hour, son, I'll be comin' down there lookin' for you."

Clint Abbott didn't believe that anything could happen that he couldn't handle. But still, suppose he got drygulched or something? Suppose old Pop Peters came down here later, looking for him and maybe ran into Villon and his tough gunslingers. Then what? It would be the old man's finish, sure.

Clint loved Pop like a father, even if the old man did treat him like a kid some times, and this made him hesitate. But he couldn't turn back now; folks would laugh at him.

The nearest wall of the cabin was barely fifty feet away. Clint wiped his mind clean of his doubts and ran at top speed for it. Close alongside the log wall he stopped, hunted out a place where the mud chinking had fallen out and peered through between the logs.

He could see nearly the entire inside of the cabin, all except the corner nearest him. Nothing there but an old table, a big, rusty cast iron stove and an old, home-made chair with a rawhide seat. Even the air coming through the space in the wall seemed dead. Clint was beginning to feel slightly foolish. He felt like a little boy playing Indian fighter; he glanced around to see if any members of the posse, up on the ridge to the west, could see him.

He straightened, started around the corner toward the door, making no effort at caution. But he still couldn't entirely shake off his uneasy feeling and the last twenty feet to the door, he stepped as softly as a puma.

At the edge of the yawning door-

way he gathered himself, cocked his six-guns, then leaped inside, swung to the right to put his back against the wall.

And as he leaped inside, the whole roof seemed to fall in on his head. Then blackness flowed over him in a wild burst of weird lights.

When he finally opened his eyes again, the first thing he saw was a short, slender hombre, sitting part way on the old table, looking at him with a half grin on his swarthy face. There was a dirty patch over the man's left eye, but his right was coal black and there was a glitter in it that more than made up for the blank patch over the left. A small, narrow black mustache was trimmed straight across under a thin, beak nose. About this little outlaw there was the sleek, powerful grace of a mountain lion, and just about as much heart.

Sitting on their heels in a far corner were two of the toughest-looking outlaws that Clint had ever seen. One of them, a big, burly, whiskered hombre, glared viciously at Clint, his hand on one of his guns. The other was an oldster, gray, skinny, and stooped.

Clint tried to raise a hand to his throbbing head and discovered that he was bound securely to the old chair that he had seen in the cabin. A lasso rope had been wound many times about his body and the back of the chair, from his elbows up to his neck. His arms were free from the elbows down, his legs unbound. But he might as well have been in a straightjacket, for all the good that did him.

His holsters were empty, and his head ached as if it would split. A smear of blood had trickled into the corner of his mouth; he spat out the salty taste of it.

For a few minutes he sagged in the stout old chair, up against the wall of the cabin near the big rusty cook stove, getting his world in order again. And with full realization of his foolish, cock-sure actions, he cursed himself for being such an easy mark. Probably One-Eye Villon had been watching him ever since he stopped to study the cabin.

(Continued On Page 98)

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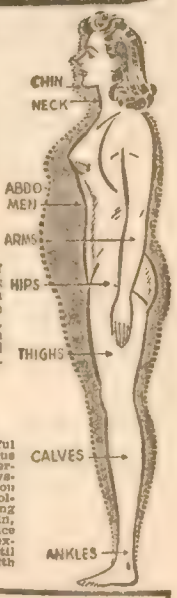

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(Continued From Page 97)

FOR the first time in the two years that he had been Pop Peters' deputy, it slowly dawned on Clint that maybe he wasn't the deadly curly wolf that he had thought himself. His only excuse for being alive was the chance that Villon planned to use him in his get-away. Doubts began to poison his mind; maybe there had been more than a little of luck in his favor when he had hauled in that noted outlaw, Red Dorgan, a while back. His opinion of Pop's sure, steady, cautious ways underwent a decided change.

These thoughts sobered him. He wasn't fooling himself about what One-Eye Villon would do to him when he found out that he could no longer use him. And now, Pop Peters would be drawn into Villon's trap too, when the old man came down here looking for him. Pop would meet the same fate that the outlaws surely meant to deal out to him when they were through with him. Bitterness flooded over him. Good old Pop—as good as dead.

If he had taken Pop's wise counsel and gathered up three or four of the posse to go with him. . . But no, he knew so much more than the old law man. Clint cursed bitterly, under his breath.

At last he lifted his head and stared at One-Eye Villon for a minute. "I had a hunch all along, as soon as I spotted this cabin, that you were inside, Villon," he said slowly.

The little outlaw gazed silently for a time, that fixed half grin still on his face. Then he shrugged slightly. "If you suspect, why you play the fool, Senor Deputy?" he purred. "I have watch you; you act like the leetle boy who hunt the Indian."

Clint Abbott let the taunt go. "These hills are crawling with men," he said. "Every out is blocked. If they catch you and your gang of murderers, none of you will ever see the inside of the Hondo jail. You'll swing from the nearest tree.

"And they'll sure catch you. No way for you to get away."

The big whiskered outlaw in the corner leaped to his feet, jerked a

gun. "Aw, let's blast the danged law-dog, right now, One-Eye," he snapped. "I'd have killed 'im in the first place, when he come in the door, instead of smashin' 'im with a gun barrel, only for you."

One-Eye Villon turned his fake grin on the man and stared steadily at him for a minute. The effect of that cold, unblinking stare on him, was like letting the air out of a toy balloon. The man dropped his vicious scowl, shifted nervously. Then he sat back on his heels quietly, stared at the earth floor.

"You, too, Rinder; you want to play the fool. Just like our friend the Senor Deputy," the soft, purring voice of One Eye Villon said. "We can use thees hombre. And anyhow, one shot down here in thees cabin and every man in the hills will be here, pronto. If we hide here, undiscovered until dark. . ." Villon shrugged, slipped a slender-bladed *cuchillo* from his right boot. A quick, effortless flip of his wrist and the knife thudded solidly into the log wall within inches of Clint Abbott's neck.

Villon turned his grin on his two pards. "Thees way might be better if we find out we can not use thees hombre for make the get-away. No?" His voice was still soft and smooth. The man seemed to be enjoying himself. He pointed at the other man hunkered in the corner. "Pete, maybe you like to play the fool too, like the Senor Deputy. No?"

Pete grunted. "You're runnin' this swaray, One-Eye," he said quickly.

Villon laughed. He turned to Clint again. "Perhaps all those men who guard a ring about us—perhaps they would not want their friend the Senor Deputy to have hees throat cut by the so bad bank robbers. No? That way maybe, is the trail out of thees leetle trouble for Senor Pancho Arnaldo Villa Y Villon and his two caballeros. Is it not so, Senor Deputy?"

CLINT grinned. "You shore got lots of names anyway, ain't you, even if you ain't got no brains to go with 'em," he said slowly. "It's

(Continued On Page 100)

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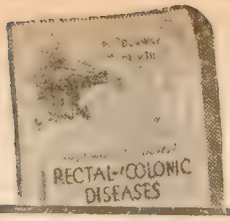

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(Continued From Page 99)

snakes like you who give good Mexicans a bad name in this country."

For once, One-Eye Villon's half grin faded. The glitter in his good eye increased. A black scowl spread over his lean face as his hand slowly reached to his left boot leg. Another slender-bladed, keen *cuchillo* glinted in his hand; he slid from the table, stood poised, his vicious stare on Clint's throat. The two outlaws in the corner half rose, their gaze tense. Clint Abbott stared the little outlaw squarely in the eye.

Then suddenly, One-Eye Villon relaxed. The mocking grin came back to his face. He shrugged slightly. "Not now, Senor Deputy," he purred. "Maybe I use you first, to get to the border through those friends of yours who want to kill me. To me you are worth more on the hoof than with the throat cut. Am I not smart, Senor?"

"Yeh, you're smart, Villon. But not smart enough to save that skinny neck of yours from the rope. Gimme my guns and an even break and I'll kill all three of you. Save you from hangin'."

One-Eye Villon laughed shortly. "Because you are one great fool, it is not to be that I am fool, too. Oh no, Senor Deputy. If you are smart and help me and my *caballeros* get away, maybe I let you go free."

"Yeh! Maybe!"

It was fast getting dusk. Inside the cabin it was nearly dark. Villon turned from Clint. "Pete," he snapped. "You go through the window on the other end of the *casa*. Go in the mesquite *bosque*. Put on the *caballos*, the saddles. Make ready for leave thees place. Me and Rinder; we wait here. We watch. When the dark, she is here good, we bring the Senor Deputy. Then we go for the border."

Pete nodded, shuffled to the other end of the cabin and climbed out stiffly. Rinder took his post, watching the trail through a hole in the side of the cabin. Ten minutes later he suddenly turned, cursed softly. "Company comin', One-Eye," he said in a low tone. "Looks like the old

he-goat himself, Old Pop Peters, the sheriff."

Instantly, One-Eye Villon slid away from the table, ran to the wall and looked out. "Of a truth, it is the sheriff," he half whispered. "And I see no one with him. No. He is alone. Now! Thees is good. We catch the old *cabron* too. Then we make those two take us free, to the border. After that. . ." He shrugged.

Villon and Rinder were gazing through holes between the logs. Clint had gone a shade paler, under his deep tan. His jaw set. He put all the power of his big muscles into a mighty effort to free himself, but the tight twist lass rope wound around his body from the hips up, did not give an inch. His arms were free from his elbows down. He tried to squirm around to get at the knots, where the rope was tied about the chairback. It was no use; he had been tied by an expert.

Sweat pouring down his face, Clint at last gave up his efforts. He cursed savagely, in exasperation. Instantly, One-Eye Villon was beside him, a heavy six-gun in his hand. "If you do not shut the mouth, I break the head," he growled in a low tone.

"All right. All right! I'll keep quiet," Clint said. He couldn't help Pop if he were knocked out again, he reasoned to himself.

Villon leaped back to the wall, peered through a hole. "He is coming on. Rinder, you get low in the corner. I, myself, will hit with the gun, hees head. I take no chance that you might keel him. He is old, and we need thees one, too." He slipped silently to one side of the doorway, flattened himself behind the door, out of sight.

Clint could hear old Pop's horse coming at a walk over the rocky ground. In his mind he saw the old man ride up to the door, step down stiffly, walk in with his guns drawn, as he had done. Then, One-Eye's gun coming down with a thud on Pop's gray head. It was more than Clint could endure. The thought was constantly in his mind that all this was his fault. "If Pop dies, I killed him. Just as much as if I shot him," he

(Continued On Page 102)

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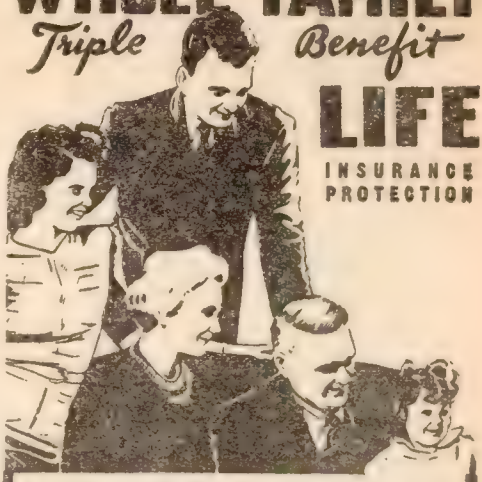

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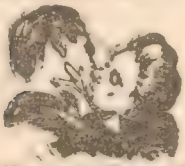

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(Continued From Page 101)

groaned to himself. He threw his might into another effort to get loose. The home-made chair teetered, nearly went over. His legs, free, helped him hitch the chair over back of the big, rusty cook stove.

ONE-EYE hissed sibilantly, motioned toward Clint. Rinder leaped to his feet, stood close in front of him, his gun pointed.

Abruptly, Clint ceased struggling, drew his legs back on either side of the chair legs. Rinder nodded, swung his glance along the wall to the doorway, half turned.

Clint heard Pop pull up his horse a little way off. "Clint! Clint! You in there?" the old man called. His voice showed his deep anxiety for his deputy.

Clint opened his mouth to shout a warning. Then he snapped his jaws shut. His warning would mean quick death for Pop Peters from the guns of the half-breed, Villon. It was fast getting dark. The outlaws could blast the sheriff if they had to, make a break now, using Clint as hostage.

Clint heard faintly the creak of saddle leather as Pop got down. Rinder turned his head toward Villon. "He's comin'," he whispered.

It was the break that Clint had been waiting for. Both of his stout boots swung up, driven with all the force of his legs. At the same instant he threw himself, chair and all, to the floor. His square-toed boots had landed heavily on Rinder's wrist. The outlaw's gun fell to the floor. A quick lunge, and Clint had it.

Rinder grunted a startled oath, went for his other gun. Clint swung the outlaw's gun up and fired. The heavy slug hit the man square in the chest, knocked him flat.

Clint had the old cook stove between him and Villon. He threw himself around wildly, chair and all, to bring his gun to bear on One-Eye Villon, from behind the stove. Still, he couldn't see the outlaw. He cursed the clumsy chair that held him back, then hooked his toe into it, flung it over and rolled clear of the stove.

He looked up. He was gazing

straight into the twin guns of One-Eye. "Drop the gun!" Villon yelled. "I keel you, fool."

Clint dropped his gun. His mind whirled. In another instant Pop might charge in; it looked like the last chance was gone.

Then suddenly he swung his gaze to the doorway. "Let 'im have it, Pop," he yelled. "Shoot!"

Villon wheeled like a streak toward the doorway. Clint snatched up his gun, fired three shots as fast as he could squeeze trigger. One-Eye Villon staggered against the wall, slowly collapsed, sank to the floor. He was dead.

"You hurt?" Pop yelled, from a position at the edge of the clearing.

"No, but keep clear. I got two of 'em. One more yet—out in the brush somewhere. Look out for 'im."

He had barely ceased yelling his warning when the thud of running hoofs came to his ears. It faded rapidly down the canyon toward the desert. Pete, evidently, was getting out while he could.

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"Son, you're almost as good a law man as you think you are, and that's a right smart," Pop cut in. "You shore did end this here man hunt, like you was braggin' you'd do. I'm almighty proud of you, son."

"Reckon I had a lot of luck, Pop. If One-Eye Villon hadn't fallen for that old gag I pulled on 'im when he had me covered. . . But anyway, from now on, the story-book hero stuff is out, far's I'm concerned.

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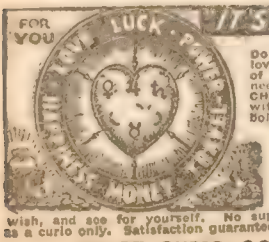

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By Charles D. Richardson, Jr.

Bus Sealey was a dang clever rustler —too clever for his health!

BUS SEALEY, outlaw and top hand cow rustler by profession, stood up from the two Lazy B men he had just tied with thick rope, and surveyed his handiwork critically.

Sealey gave a satisfied grunt. His gunmen behind him by the campfire grinned.

"Gentlemen," Bus told the roped pair, "tonight you are to be granted a rare honor, one which seldom falls to the lot of ordinary men. In short, you will assist in the driving off of the Lazy B herd. You may begin by telling us where the herd is bedded."

The short man, tied nearest the cactus clump, was the Lazy B foreman, "Puffers" Simpson. Puffers suffered from occasional asthmatic attacks. Breathing heavily, he glared at his tall captor.

"Cut me loose," he said acidly, "and I'll assist you—on a one-way trip to hell!"

The little foreman's gaze traveled over to his bound companion. Kirk Gordon, the Lazy B owner, was quietly chewing on the stick of gum he'd begun just before the Sealey men had jumped them. Cool as a cucumber. Kirk Gordon, and it made Simpson boil. To be bushwhacked by Bus Sealey was no laughing matter.

Sealey and his men had surprised Gordon and Puffers from behind as the latter were riding back from where they'd left the gun-guard Potter with the herd. There was a big dance on at the Lazy B ranchhouse, and Gordon wanted all hands to enjoy some part of it. Potter had just come from there.

THE deep-cut frown on Simpson's forehead lengthened. If the Sealey gang got the Lazy B herd, it would mean double hell. Gordon would be unable to meet his mortgage payments and lose the entire Lazy B. Puffers Simpson, a married man, would be without a job, and Puffer's wife was soon to have a baby.

Bus Sealey was bringing over a glowing brand iron from the fire. "Gentlemen, I'd hate to have to resort to persuasion—"

Kirk Gordon, his immobile face red-tinged in the sparking firelight, moistened his lips. He stared at the nearing brand iron, at the hard features of the gunslick mob.

He worked on his chewing gum a moment before he spoke.

"Puffers," the Lazy B owner said, "is a mite hard to convince. Me, I know when I'm licked. Sealey, if I tell you where that herd is, will you guarantee not to hurt the womenfolk and ranch buildings?"

Bus Sealey's brown eyes moved. He rubbed reflectively at the mole on his chin.

"Why, you know me," he said chuckling, "always the ladies' man. Kiss 'em quick, and let 'em go. Of course, if it gets dark, we may have to burn the barn, kill a waddy or two. Nothing drastic, though."

The men by the fire guffawed. Sealey swerved the glowing iron. "Okay, Gordon, the steers. Where they bedded?"

"In Goose Canyon, far end," Kirk said. He looked apologetically at Simpson. "You can drive the herd through the Pass there. Better rush 'em through, before the Lazy B boys get wise."

Sealey was rubbing at the mole. "Goose Canyon. And there's a hell of a big rock perched just above the Pass. If someone was to push that baby over after the herd was out, nobody could follow."

He smacked his thigh resoundingly, turned to his men.

"By Jingo, that's what we'll do!" Swiftly, he instructed the gunnies clearly. "Harry and Dutch can pop the boulder. Eddie, you stay behind and see that these yellow coyotes stay

(Continued On Page 106)

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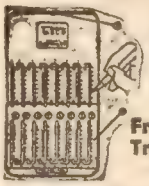

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(Continued From Page 105)

put. Soon's me and the rest get the cows through, we'll give the three-shot signal. You can join us at the Border. Let's go, men."

UP TO THE moment, Puffers Simpson had restrained his tongue, because he had been too shocked to speak. Kirk Gordon, his boss, his pal, for whom he had raised callouses for over ten years, giving up like that. Gordon, the gent Puffers always believed could get the better of anything wearing pants. He could have bluffed, not shown openly his fear of Bus and the hot iron. He didn't have to help Bus that way.

The boulder, Gordon often had pointed out to Puffers, wouldn't take much urging to upset. Just last Saturday, Kirk had been up on the cliff, berry picking. A rattlesnake, almost beneath his hand, had reared, and Kirk had blown off its head with his sixgun. He had backed up against the big rock at the time, felt it tremble to the explosion. He'd noted, also, the loose soil and stones beneath it. "A man-sized sneeze," Kirk had said half-jokingly, "could topple that jigger."

Once in the Pass, Simpson knew, nothing short of dynamite could budge the rock. The Lazy B herd truly would be gone for keeps.

"Kirk Gordon," the little foreman spat venomously, "you damned Judas!"

Gordon averted his face. Bus Sealey prodded his men from their cherished positions about the fire, and the whole gang saddled up and rode off. In the quickening, their forms flitted between the mesquites like misshapen ghouls.

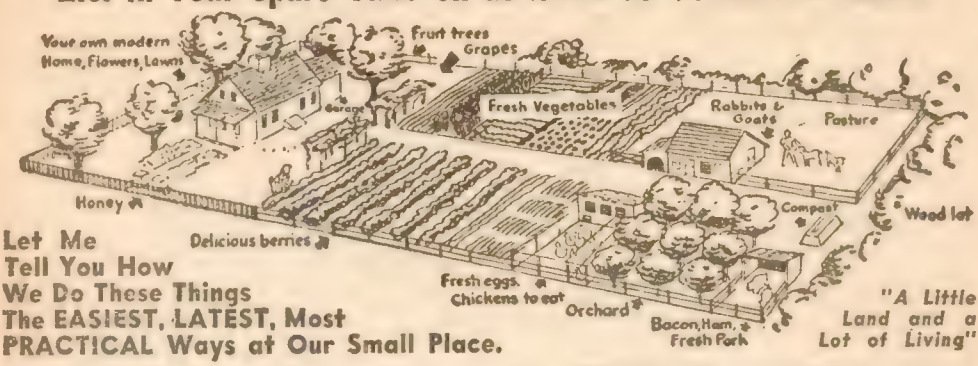
Gloom and a damp fog settled. Simpson wrenched at his cords. He couldn't budge them. From the darkness, came the muted voice of Kirk Gordon. "Wriggle over this way, so that your wrists touch my feet."

Puzzled, Simpson twisted. Gordon brought up his bound boots with difficulty. The spur on the right heel began to saw on Puffers' cords. Puffers gave a stifled gasp as the cold steel cut at his flesh.

(Continued On Page 108)

Have You Heard About My "HAVE-MORE" PLAN?

How to Raise Your Own Delicious Meat, Eggs, Vegetables, Etc. in Your Spare Time on as Little as ¾ Acre of Land!



Let Me Tell You How We Do These Things The EASIEST, LATEST, Most PRACTICAL Ways at Our Small Place.

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Maybe you already are raising your own food—or at least part of it. Maybe you are even a full-time farmer. Or maybe you are a city-dweller just hoping and planning ahead.

Whatever your situation, I think you'll be interested in my Plan, because it's really a story — the true story of our place, of my family and me. It's the story of how we moved to the country outside of New York City . . . How I kept my regular job and how we've gone in for "backyard farming" in our spare time!

If you are already doing something like this you'll want to "compare notes" with me. Maybe I can give you some new ideas . . . short cuts . . . help you get better results.

If you are not yet doing it, but are planning to, you'll find my Plan very helpful. It will tell you how to look for the right kind of place near your job, how to get started the easiest, most inexpensive way. My Plan will show you lots of short cuts, help you avoid many mistakes.

"One Hour a Day"

Some people may think this sort of thing takes a lot of hard unpleasant work. That is not so! It does take some time—but really not very much. We take care of the chores at our place in only one hour a day on the average! It does take some work, but it's not unpleasant — it's fun! And it does not take much land—even a fairly large city lot can be enough!

The secret, of course, is doing things the easiest, most practical ways, taking advantage of all the modern, up-to-date labor-saving methods that have been developed in recent years! And it is these new, easier, better methods that my Plan tells you about! See right hand side of this page for list of things my Plan covers.

Mrs. Robinson and our son, Jack. The home-raised goose I'm holding weighed 10¼ lbs. at 10 weeks of age. All the food it ate was stale bread and grass growing around our place.

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Being outdoors around the place is healthful, too. The whole family eats better, sleeps better, feels better and gets along together better. Your children, if you have any, have more wholesome surroundings. This "way of life" is really the soundest foundation for family happiness.

Saves on Food Bills and Ration Points

Food prices are very high now—everybody knows that! So, just figure how much you'd save if you raised 50% to 75% of all the food you buy! Not only that—it doesn't take any ration points to raise your own! You can have more food, better food, and save money doing it!

Security Against Hard Times

Maybe you'd like to retire some day. If there's a postwar depression, you might even lose your job. I hope not, but it might happen, and if it did, wouldn't it be swell to have a place where you could raise most of your food, where you could get by with very little cash income? Wouldn't it be a good idea to know how to do these things even if you never have to! I can tell you it sure gives me a feeling of independence and security and I'm sure it would do the same for you!

Well, I guess you can see I'm pretty well "sold" on this whole idea. It's fun, it's healthful, it saves you money, you eat better, you feel secure and independent. That's why I've told the whole story about it in my "Have-More" Plan, and why I'm offering my Plan for sale. (Price $1.00.) I wish I could give it away to everybody that might be interested, but of course I can't, and after all one dollar isn't very much.

So, if you're interested either to "compare notes" with me or to plan ahead—then send me your name and address and one dollar and I'll send you my Plan by return mail.

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Yours for "a little land and a lot of living"—

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(Continued From Page 106)

IT SEEMED that the rope would never sever. Then all at once, Simpson felt the pressure on his wrists ease, the hemp slither from his hands. Quickly, the foreman removed the coils from about his legs. He freed Gordon of his ropes.

The two men jumped the rustler Eddie as the latter was leaving the fire. Eddie gave a grunt. Puffers' fist landed on his chin, and the outlaw folded.

Gordon took the man's gun.

"Let's go for the canyon," he said.

Simpson looked at him as they made for their horses. "You're a bit late with that courage, ain't you? Bus'll get them longhorns through before we can catch up with them, and we ain't got time to reach the Lazy B boys. Dammit, Kirk, I never thought I'd live to see the day when you'd crawfish like a—"

"Save your breath," Kirk Gordon advised quietly, "and ride."

They mounted, goaded their horses down valley. It was a good half hour's ride to the towering V-shaped cleft in the walls of Goose Canyon. Puffers Simpson cursed as they swung about the prickly-pear bed and spotted the Sealey rustlers spooking the Lazy B heard madly for the Pass. The animals were boogered into a frenzied run now—a surging, unbroken mass. You could have as easily halted an avalanche.

Bret Potter, the Lazy B gun-guard, spurred up then on his pony.

"Where in hell you been?" he wanted to know. "Sealey and his skunks just now stampeded our cows. I seen they was too big a setup for me to buck alone, so I rid for the house. Us boys had better—"

Kirk Gordon worked on his chewing gum. "We may not need the boys."

Potter glared. "Are you loco—" he began.

Gordon pointed to the huge boulder far up on the cliff. "Bus figures to shove over that rock when he gets the cattle through."

The gun-guard swore. "It'll cork up the Pass, shore as shootin'. Hell, man, we've got to stop 'em!"

(Continued On Page 118)

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(Continued From Page 108)

"Try and do it," Puffers Simpson said dryly. "Seems like we're due for a roarin' finish."

Kirk Gordon said softly, "We're wastin' time gabbing. Ride."

THEY RODE. They roweled up their blowing mounts after the dwindling blob that was the Lazy B herd. Faint poppings, drifting back canyon, indicated that Bus was driving the cows to the limit. The gunfire whipped the longhorns straight for the narrow gut. Bret Potter groaned.

"Critters be goin' through any minute. Every dang one. Wait'll the boys at the house hear of—"

Puffers Simpson was staring at the boulder above. Etched against the star-sprinkled sky, in the light of the full moon, you could see the two Sealey men waiting to cork up the Pass. They were a few feet from the giant rock. Minutes more and four arms would be pushing, then goodbye Lazy B herd.

The only other trail to the Border took twice as long.

"Adios, job," Puffers gasped. He wondered if he could face his wife and kids again. They figured everything he and his boss did was right.

The splitting report echoing then didn't come from a gun. It was the snapping of stone, the giant leaning boulder on the cliff edge. Staring, Simpson and his pals saw the big rock quiver, drop a fraction, topple. It toppled forward, grinding the edge of the cliff to powder as it slid out into space. The stone mass struck the opposite wall a thundering blow, then plunged for the sea of bobbing horns beneath.

The ground trembled. A half-dozen steers were buried below the enormous rock. But the main part of the herd was safe, piled up in a bawling tangle.

They soon unscrambled themselves, wheeled, and pounded back the way they had come.

BUS SEALEY and his men tried to get out of the way. They spurred their horses into a frantic

(Continued On Page 112)

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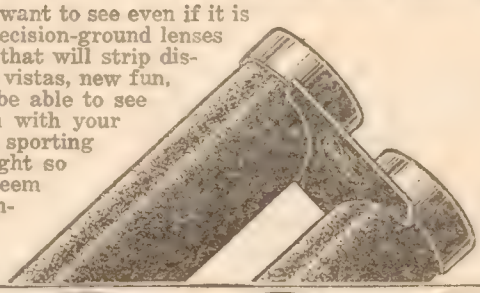

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(Continued From Page 110)

dash for higher ground. They might have made it, given another few seconds. But the herd caught up with them, engulfing them, flattened them.

The rustlers' screams were not nice to hear.

The rolling slope slowed the animals finally. When the Lazy B trio were able to approach the wild-eyed creatures, they saw a strange sight. One of the cows, a large heifer with an unusually wide horn spread, was dragging along something attached to its left horn. A man.

It was Bus Sealey, battered and bruised as if he had been through a grist mill. The big rustler was locked to the animal's horn by his rawhide suspenders.

He was still alive. Simpson and Gordon freed him from the horn. Bus Sealey had lost all of his calm assuredness.

"Oh Gawd!" he kept repeating. "Oh Gawd!"

He was white as a sheet. Kirk Gordon, chewing his gum thoughtfully, removed the man's gunbelt.

"Reckon I kind of neglected to warn you about that rock, Bus," he said. "A downright shame."

Simpson and Potter stared. Kirk Gordon grinned faintly.

"Vibration," he explained. "The cows' hoofs, dozens of them pounding in rhythm, unseated the stone before Sealey's men were ready. We lost six steers, but saved the majority."

Puffers Simpson gasped. "I'll be damned. Boss, you knowed it would work like that all the time. You got Bus to hurry them steers along because you knowed it would start the rock to— My Gosh! Will yuh ever forgive me for thinkin' you was—"

Kirk Gordon was glancing at the sky, at the bright moon disc above the cedar tops.

"Clear day tomorrow. Give me a hand with Bus here, boys, and let's get on back to that shindig. Though I'm afraid Bus won't feel much like dancing."

He popped a fresh stick of gum into his mouth, started to work on it.

THE END

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